

# TEACHERS' VOICES 7

Teaching vocabulary

editors: Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce



National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research

*Teachers' voices 7:*  
*Teaching vocabulary*

**Editors:**  
**Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce**

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research  
Macquarie University



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## Teachers' voices 7: Teaching vocabulary

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Teachers' voices 7: Teaching vocabulary

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## Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
ASLPR	Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating
ATM	automatic teller machine
BTN	<i>Behind the News</i>
CSWE	Certificates I, II and III in Spoken and Written English
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFTPOS	Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale
EPRS	Educational Placement and Referral Services
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
L1	first language
MWU	multiword unit
NCELTR	National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research
NSW AMES	New South Wales Adult Migrant English Service
OHT	overhead transparency
PIN	Personal Identification Number
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

## Introduction and acknowledgments

This book is the seventh in the *Teachers' voices* series. As with other books in the series, it presents accounts of action research conducted nationally in the AMEP through the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University. Since 1992, *Teachers' voices* projects have contributed to a continuing process of research conducted by researchers and teachers working collaboratively. They have focused on issues of practical concern and interest to AMEP practitioners and have provided first-hand opportunities for teachers to be involved in nationally focused research.

The present volume, focusing on the teaching of vocabulary, is no exception. During 2000, we worked for a period of approximately six months with 25 teachers from six States, the largest number of States so far involved in a *Teachers' voices* project. Drawing on the overall theme of vocabulary teaching, teachers worked in groups to share their knowledge and experience of this area and undertook to research further specific issues of individual interest.

The level of involvement and the enthusiasm of the teachers who participated seems to indicate that teachers value opportunities to engage in research as a way to move beyond a 'technicist' approach to teaching. Having opportunities to re-evaluate teaching practices and to analyse classroom processes takes teachers along a more constructivist professional pathway, a strategy to go on learning about and appraising practice that many find both energising and rewarding.

In these pages, readers will find edited accounts of the research undertaken by 19 of the teachers (not all of the teachers were able to submit reports). While some teachers wrote longer accounts than those printed here, space restrictions mean that it is not always possible to include the full versions. In editing the reports, we hope that we have been true to the overall spirit of the teachers' submissions.

Thank you to all the teachers who participated in the project. Your willingness to allow readers of this volume into your classrooms helps to promote the professional life of the AMEP. Your commitment and participation, like that of others in previous *Teachers' voices* projects, made it all the more rewarding for us as project coordinators and editors.

Each State was also asked to nominate a State-based team leader to coordinate the project at the local level. We would like to thank them for the commitment they gave to the project on top of their other duties. Thank you to Sandra Wood in the Australian Capital Territory, Stephanie Claire in New South Wales, Joanne Wheeler in Queensland, Robin Smith in Tasmania, Nita Johnson in Western Australia and Margaret Davis in Victoria. We would also like to acknowledge the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs AMEP Branch who provided funding for the project through the AMEP Special Project Program.

*Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce*



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# *Investigating the teaching of vocabulary*

Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce

## Background

Vocabulary is an area that interests many language teachers and learners. It makes intuitive sense that acquiring vocabulary and lexical units must be a central aspect of learning any language. Yet the role of vocabulary in recent language teaching programs has often had an uncertain status, even, as Richards (2000:xi) argues, ‘at times almost disappearing from view as scholars and applied linguistics turned their attention to other dimensions of language knowledge’.

Now, it seems, a focus on vocabulary is returning to the language learning and teaching agenda. The publication of several books and articles over the past decade indicates the renewed research interest in vocabulary. This volume of *Teachers’ voices* aims to offer a perspective on vocabulary from the point of view of the classroom teacher interested in teaching vocabulary. The papers that follow, emerging from the *Teachers’ voices* project, illustrate what areas of vocabulary teaching are of interest to teachers in the AMEP and how they go about integrating a focus on vocabulary into their teaching.

## The project

The focus for the project — the teaching of vocabulary — arose partially from two previous national projects. One project focused on learners’ reading practices (see Burns and de Silva Joyce 2000) and the other focused on teaching casual conversation (see de Silva Joyce 2000).

In the reading practices project, a team of five AMEP researchers (Burns, de Silva Joyce, Lahoud, O’Sullivan and Perkins) worked together to investigate the reading practices of AMEP learners in three different language groups (Chinese, Arabic and Spanish). The reading practices project focused first on case studies of learners in three-generation families, together with interviews with other learners of the same language background enrolled in AMEP classes. One of the major findings was that learners identified the development of more effective vocabulary learning strategies as a key factor in learning to read in English. The important role of vocabulary in language learning, highlighted by the reading practices study, was considered to be worth pursuing in a further project. Teachers and researchers also felt that vocabulary teaching was a relatively neglected area of research in the AMEP.

The casual conversation project involved teachers from South Australia and New South Wales in investigating the nature of casual conversation and how it could be taught. Some of the teachers interviewed and surveyed their students about casual conversation skills. These students identified lack of vocabulary as a major barrier when listening to and trying to participate in casual conversation in work and social contexts.

The teaching vocabulary project, like others in the *Teachers’ voices* series, adopted an action research approach (see Burns 1995, 1999 for a description of this approach). Twenty-five teachers from AMEP providers in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia

volunteered to be involved in the project as teacher–researchers. In general, the teachers were experienced AMEP teachers, some of whom had conducted action research in previous projects. In each of these locations, one teacher, usually with experience in professional development, was nominated to be team leader for the duration of the project (approximately six months in each location). This teacher was the contact point for the project coordinators (Burns and de Silva Joyce).

Each group adopted a similar range of processes:

- 1 The local team leaders conducted two initial half-day workshops. In the first workshop, the teachers were asked to discuss these general questions:
  - a) What role does vocabulary teaching play in your classroom?
  - b) What importance do you place on vocabulary teaching?
  - c) How do you approach vocabulary development in class? How does this differ with different level learners?
  - d) Have you changed your focus on vocabulary?
  - e) What attitude to vocabulary development do learners have?
  - f) How do you encourage learners to take responsibility for developing vocabulary?

In preparation for the second workshop, teachers were provided with a professional reading package that included the following articles: Ellis 1997, Laufer 1997, Nation and Waring 1997, Nattinger 1988.

Each teacher was asked to read one of the articles in depth for the second workshop and to present a summary to the group. They were asked to include:

- the overall argument of the article
- the main points that they felt related to teaching adult ESL
- how the article reflected their own attitudes to teaching vocabulary
- two questions arising from the article that they wanted the group to discuss.

In some cases, teachers eventually went beyond these initial readings and found others of interest to their research.

- 2 A one-day meeting with the national project coordinators was then held in each State. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce teachers to the concept of action research and methods and techniques for conducting it (see Burns 1999).

Teachers had the opportunity to discuss their initial ideas for investigation with the group and to devise a plan of action for carrying out the research. They were also provided with a further list of references prepared by the NCELTR Resource Centre to help them extend their readings for the research, if they wished to do so. The meeting concluded with discussions with the coordinators about ways to write up the research for publication, using examples and guidelines from previous *Teachers' voices* projects (see Burns 1999:184–85 for an example).

- 3 Three further half-day workshops, led by team leaders, provided teachers with opportunities to discuss their ongoing investigations. Teachers discussed the various strategies, approaches and activities they had developed for teaching vocabulary. In some cases, these were approaches that a teacher had wished to try for some time, and in other cases they were previously used approaches that the teacher wished to analyse in more depth. Other ideas emerged directly from the readings or the group's early discussions about teaching vocabulary.



in Schmitt 2000:97) suggests that three factors come into play when defining multiword units (MWUs): institutionalisation, fixedness and noncompositionality. All three criteria should be seen as continua or clines along which MWUs vary.

- Institutionalisation** To the extent that an MWU is widely recognised and used in a speech community, it can be termed ‘institutionalised’ (*further to my letter of . . . ; by and large; you can say that again*).
- Fixedness** To a greater or lesser extent, an MWU is fixed (it cannot be completely ‘unfixed’ as then we would be dealing with words ordered by syntax). Idioms are among the most (but not completely) fixed (*to take the mickey; to have a chip on one’s shoulder*).
- Noncompositionality** To a greater or lesser extent, the meaning of an MWU will vary in its transparency of meaning. Some meanings can be relatively easily understood (*to talk politics*) while others are more opaque (*to talk turkey*).

Multiword units are common aspects of language use and serve the purpose of easing the task that speakers and writers have in producing language under pressure. Some of the most common MWUs (Schmitt 2000) include compound words (*dishwasher*), phrasal verbs (*to get up, off, out, in, down, on*), fixed phrases (binominal, consisting of two key words in fixed order — *to and fro; back and forth; ladies and gentlemen*; and trinominal, consisting of three words — *morning, noon and night; here, there and everywhere; this, that and the next thing*), idioms (*to kick the bucket*), proverbs (*a watched pot never boils*), and lexical phrases (also known as lexical chunks, prefabricated routines, gambits and so on — *Guess who I just met?, Can I help you?*).

#### Lexical patterns

Recent research based on corpora (a corpus is a computer database of language collected from a large range of written and spoken texts) has been able to add greatly to our knowledge about how vocabulary works across discourse. Corpora can show which words occur most frequently (*the* and *and* top the list) and which *kinds* of words occur most frequently (words with little or no meaning that contribute to grammatical structure — articles, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, forms of the verb *to be*). They also add to our knowledge of *collocation* (where two or more words tend to cluster together in discourse). There seem to be two basic kinds of collocation: grammatical/syntactical (eg noun, verb, adjective followed by a preposition — *followed by, adjacent to*) and semantic/lexical (two ‘equal’ content words — *wash/hair, cool/food*).

An important and interesting insight from corpus research is that not only do individual words collocate, but also strings of words. Nattinger and DeCorrico (1992) suggest that words act less as individual units and more as parts of lexical phrases in connected discourse. Again, being able to call on lexical phrases rather than individual words would seem to help people process language as ‘chunks’.

Corpus research is beginning to reveal other interesting details about lexical (word) patterns. Sinclair (1998) argues that choosing particular words guides and constrains people’s use of lexical choices several words away. The expression ‘*so sorry*’ seems to reveal the following patterns:



explicit learning may be necessary (Nation and Waring 1997 suggest a 'threshold' of between 3000 and 5000 word families), but reading (or being read to) can also expose learners to more infrequent vocabulary and this is an excellent way to extend vocabulary knowledge (see Day and Bamford 1997 and Day and Bamford in press for classroom activities).

Both types of learning are important. For example, Ellis (1997) suggests that much of the learning about the orthography and phonology of vocabulary comes from incidental tuning-in to patterns in spelling and sound systems. Meaning, on the other hand, may be better learned by explicit means such as guessing from context, using mnemonic techniques (imagery, memory) and other strategies that help to link meaning to form.

All this implies (what most teachers soon come to recognise!) that new vocabulary units cannot be presented once only. Learners need to be exposed to vocabulary repeatedly, and so recycling needs to be built into learning. It is also helpful to assist learners to take responsibility for vocabulary learning by introducing them to vocabulary learning strategies. Schmitt (2000) suggests five different types of strategies:

- 1 *Determination*: guessing from structural knowledge of the language/context (eg analyse part of speech).
- 2 *Social*: using interaction with others — teacher/learners, native speakers (eg study and practise meaning in a group).
- 3 *Memory* (mnemonics): relating the word to some previous learned knowledge (eg group words together to study them).
- 4 *Cognitive*: using more mechanical means than memory to study vocabulary (eg keep a vocabulary book).
- 5 *Metacognitive*: consciously overviewing/analysing personal learning processes (eg use English language media, songs, newscasts etc).

### Teaching vocabulary

Schmitt (2000) notes that few language teaching approaches, from grammar translation to communicative language teaching, have addressed vocabulary in any explicit way. One exception to this is the Vocabulary Control Movement in the first half of the twentieth century. It focused on minimising the load, particularly for beginning learners, and operated on the principles of presenting common vocabulary first and limiting the numbers of new words in texts. The General Service List (West 1953), which was developed for reading instruction and based largely on word frequency, resulted in a list of 2000 words. It is probably the best known outcome of this movement and has been quite influential in language teaching. It still provides a good source of the key words to which learners can be introduced (and it has recently been updated).

While there may be no well-established or 'best' way to teach vocabulary, it is possible to point to some useful guidelines for optimising vocabulary learning. We focus here on increasing quantity, and explicit and incidental approaches.

#### Quantity of vocabulary

Schmitt (2000) suggests that, in terms of increasing the quantity of vocabulary, four approaches can be useful:

- 1 Frequent words such as those in the General Service List (2000 words seems to be commonly seen as the 'threshold' for second language learners; see Nation and Waring 1997 and Meara 1995 for discussion).



## Learner groups

In these research projects (see Section One), the teachers took learners as the starting point for thinking about vocabulary. They focused on investigating learners' needs and preparing activities for the specific group of learners they taught. The research issues focused on the quantity of vocabulary to introduce at specific levels and how to introduce new vocabulary. The balance between explicit and incidental teaching was also a key question for teachers here.

## Programming

For these projects (Section Two), course planning and programming became the focus, specifically on how teachers could integrate vocabulary teaching and learning into their course design. Again, the question of whether to select an explicit or an incidental approach became important, as well as ways of implementing either of these approaches practically in the classroom. Teachers drew on several of the techniques advocated in the literature, including developing a weekly vocabulary list, using an ESP approach for specific contexts and giving learners responsibility for decision making.

## Teaching focus

Teachers focused here on developing or changing specific techniques for teaching vocabulary. A key question for many of the teachers revolved around the most effective ways to recycle vocabulary, especially vocabulary to which learners had just been introduced. Some of the studies (Section Three) monitored the progress made by the students by introducing more formal assessment techniques, such as tests and dictations, than teachers would normally have used.

## Teaching idioms

In the final group of projects, teachers focused on language aspects rather than learning or teaching aspects of vocabulary. In particular, they were interested in multiword units and specifically those with non-transparent and relatively fixed meanings that students often find difficult to acquire. All three teachers (see Section Four) chose idioms, looking at issues such as their students' use of idioms, familiarity with the concept of idioms and the similarities and differences reflected from their first language, and the effects of increasing students' knowledge of idioms on their overall vocabulary development.

## Conclusion

This *Teachers' voices* project contributed to the professional development of the coordinators and teachers in various ways. We all gained a much deeper knowledge of the literature on vocabulary and some of the recent key findings. This helped to raise our awareness in preparation for the research, as well as guiding our thinking about appropriate areas for classroom investigation.

The group workshops (with and without the coordinators of the project) helped participants to voice their questions and issues about vocabulary and to develop their ideas for research in a safe and supportive, collaborative atmosphere with colleagues working within the same overall program. A series of workshops contributed to this ongoing support and provided the means for participants to renew and extend their ideas as their research proceeded.



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# SECTION ONE

## *Developing vocabulary with different learner groups*

### **1 *Assisting low-level learners***

Shirley Sangster and Madaleine Searle

### **2 *Vocabulary development with a slow-moving post-beginner class***

Hazel Davidson

### **3 *Vocabulary in everyday communication***

Sonia Magnus

### **4 *Vocabulary development in the Home Tutor Scheme***

Colleen Fox

### **5 *Vocabulary and a CSWE II class***

Bill Derham

## Introduction

The five papers in this section examine issues that focus on teaching vocabulary to different learner levels and learners with different characteristics. The main questions that arise, when looking at different students, is how to present vocabulary and how much new vocabulary to introduce. Other questions include whether vocabulary should be previewed or should be dealt with as it arises in texts.

Shirley Sangster and Madaleine Searle are experienced teachers from Western Australia who focused on CSWE I learners. They were interested in adapting a picture vocabulary resource that had been produced in Western Australia a number of years ago. After introducing the students in their classes to the format of the book and using it systematically in class, Shirley and Madaleine observed how their students responded.

Hazel Davidson is a teacher from Queensland who was interested in developing strategies to help post-beginner students to deal with unfamiliar words. She used a fictional ESL reader to focus student attention on unfamiliar words, which were then recycled through various systematic classroom exercises. She tested student vocabulary development and surveyed students about the effectiveness of different activity types.

Dealing with a CSWE II class, Sonia Magnus from Western Australia focused on the vocabulary of everyday communication and developed vocabulary sheets based on a range of topics. Through classroom and homework activities the students worked with the vocabulary to be learnt each week. Sonia then observed whether the students incorporated the new vocabulary into their speaking and writing.

Colleen Fox, as coordinator of the Home Tutor Scheme in the ACT, was interested in exploring how home tutors incorporated vocabulary into their tutoring sessions and how the learning styles of the students affected vocabulary learning. She developed a package of materials for the tutors that presented vocabulary in different ways and she surveyed the tutors about how students responded to the different activities.

Bill Derham is a teacher in Western Australia. In class, Bill presented vocabulary sheets in different formats to see how students responded. He looked at ways of presenting new vocabulary and the amount of words that students could cope with.

# 1 Assisting low-level learners

Shirley Sangster and Madaleine Searle



Focus question:

*Does the use of a picture vocabulary book assist lower-level learners to acquire and retain vocabulary in context and in decontextualised situations?*

## Background

For the action research project we targeted two Certificate in Spoken and Written English I (CSWE I) classes — 38 students overall. The students were assessed as 0 to 0+ on the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR) scale. Both classes had a high proportion of students who had recently arrived in Australia.

In terms of learning pace, one class was a slow-paced group and the other was a normal-paced group. Many students had had little formal education. We focused on this level because beginner students need to acquire a lot of new vocabulary to use as building blocks for future language acquisition.

We adapted a pre-existing picture vocabulary book, which had been produced in the Western Australian AMEP, by adding a contents page, extra vocabulary lists and blank pages for students to add their own words. The revised book was given to students in the first week of the term. The students were told to put the book in their file and bring it to class every day.

## Expected outcomes

Each class proceeded at its own pace and individual program, but the teachers conferred frequently and agreed on and shared materials. In undertaking the research, it was expected that the students would:

- learn how to use a contents page for reference
- become familiar with categorisation
- improve their organisational skills
- develop independent study skills
- begin to develop as autonomous learners
- improve their spelling
- develop strategies for learning spelling
- use the book as a reference during class exercises
- find it easier to locate vocabulary needed to complete tasks (oral and written).

It was also expected that the vocabulary book would become a focus for learning and that students would develop personal strategies for acquiring new vocabulary.

## Procedure

During the first three weeks, we directed students to the vocabulary book for specific class activities. For example, the normal-paced class were also given set pages to learn

spelling. This was tested every Friday, and a dictation passage was developed that used words from the spelling list and words used during class exercises. The slower-paced class did not have formal spelling tests or set dictations.

During this time, common worksheets — for example, teacher-devised 'word sleuths' — were used in both classes and we continued to use the book to suit the topics and programs. Both classes used the blank pages at the back of the book to record lists of adjectives, pronouns and grammatical formulae.

With direction for usage from the teacher, the book helped students to organise their work so that it was easily accessible. Thus, students became less reliant on the teacher.

## Observations

After the initial period when we had instructed students in how to use the book, daily observations of student non-directed usage was recorded in a journal. We observed that most students in both classes regularly used the book as a reference during various class activities. Students had translated particular sections (of their choice) in their own time. Some student groups got together before class and helped each other with specific spelling lists.

Most students in the slower-paced class used the spaces provided under each word to fill in their own information and referred to it in later class activities. The section on *Personal Identification* seemed to be particularly useful for this application. Students also used the book for self-study, when they had finished set class work early and were waiting for the rest of the class to catch up.

Apart from two students in the normal-paced class who usually did not bring the book daily, all of the students were positive about the usefulness of having this resource. The students commented that they found it interesting and relevant, and that the pictures were clear and assisted their understanding. This was a positive learning experience. As it is difficult to find suitable coursebooks for low-level students, it was pleasing that the Picture Vocabulary Book proved to be fairly comprehensive.

There was a great improvement in student organisational and referencing skills. The general level of spelling competence increased. Many students in both classes successfully developed personal learning strategies.

At this level, learning vocabulary is vital for basic language proficiency. Having a systematic approach facilitates learning.

## 2 Vocabulary development with a slow-moving post-beginner class

Hazel Davidson



### Focus questions:

- 1 *Can students in a slow-moving CSWE II class be persuaded to delay using their dictionaries in favour of analysing what they already know about unfamiliar words in a text?*
- 2 *Can analysing what students already know about unfamiliar words in a text, reinforced by formal testing and a variety of exercises, aid retention of newly encountered vocabulary?*

### Background

This class had approximately equal proportions of involuntary students, who had been sent by the government as a condition of their unemployment benefits, and other students who were paying fees. They were all ineligible for AMEP courses, in most cases because they had already completed their learning entitlement of 510 hours.

The fact that they were still at CSWE II level after 510 hours meant that the students had a slow pace of learning. This was because some had no education in their first language, some were traumatised refugees and some had health or domestic problems. The class profile is outlined in the following table.

Countries of origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Argentina</li> <li>• Cambodia</li> <li>• Chile</li> <li>• El Salvador</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Former Yugoslavia</li> <li>• Laos</li> <li>• Vietnam</li> <li>• Western Samoa</li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 0–12 years</li> </ul>	
Length of residence in Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 months to 30 years</li> </ul>	

The teachers who had taught the class in the previous term reported that the students were generally jaded and unenthusiastic. Many of them had already used most of the resources available at the centre.

### Teaching approach

Confronted with this scenario, I felt a new approach and new teaching resources were necessary. I wanted to base the course on a reading text, but could find nothing at the right level that I thought would be fresh to all of the students. So, with some misgivings, I settled on the reader *Average Dead Body* (Baylis 2000), which I knew would be extremely challenging to the class and would require very substantial teacher support.

Although my main focus was on vocabulary development, I did not want to neglect other aspects of the curriculum. I also needed to be able to assess approximately 30 per cent of the CSWE competencies. Therefore my aims were:

- to foster interest in the story itself
- to encourage students to recognise their own prior knowledge and use this to develop their understanding of unfamiliar vocabulary
- to use the newly acquired vocabulary in a variety of situations as a conscious tool for reinforcement
- to integrate specific vocabulary work with all the macro skills.

With these aims and the class situation in mind, I retyped the text into short segments of one to two pages in length. I increased the font size to 14 point and double-spaced the text. I also provided line numbers for ease of reference to specific words. The resulting text allowed students with low literacy skills to read more easily and also gave room for annotation. A sample extract (Baylis 2000:7–8) follows:

'Not that I expected precisely this,' he continued, beckoning to someone behind me for coffee, 'but I have been bracing myself for something unpleasant for the past few years. My daughter, Detective-Sergeant, liked to do things that would annoy me. It was her way of apologising to the world for having a successful father.'

'Do you know who her friends were? What circles she moved in?'

'She worked in some kind of drop-in centre in Cabramatta.'

I established the following regular routine with the class:

- Step 1: I read the text aloud while the students highlighted unfamiliar words.
- Step 2: We discussed the plot — *What has happened? Why? What do you think will happen next?*
- Step 3: We analysed unknown vocabulary. Students called out words they had highlighted, one paragraph at a time. These were entered on a grid on the whiteboard (see grid below). This grid was based on Clarke and Nation's (1980:211) work on teaching guessing.

Line	Word (important?)	Part of speech	Sentence structure =/+ +ve/-ve	General context	Related words	Your guess	Dictionary meaning

- Step 4: The students completed vocabulary exercises based on Ellis's (1997) work. I chose a number of words from the text, eg *homicide, runaway, tarmac, runners, frosty, divert, dew, curfew*. I projected them onto the whiteboard, discussed the meanings again and then the students used the words in the exercises (see parts of sample exercises on next page).

**Sample exercise 1**  
 Complete these sentences:

a) My children have a 9 o'clock \_\_\_\_\_.

b) It is often \_\_\_\_\_ on winter mornings.

c) After the accident yesterday the policeman \_\_\_\_\_ the traffic.

**Sample exercise 2**  
 Match the words on the left with the meanings on the right:

tarmac	• people who run
homicide	• water on plants early in the morning
runners	• time when everyone must be inside off streets
dew	• flat place where aeroplanes take off
curfew	• murder

**Step 5:** We summarised the text. With the aid of the table below, which was projected onto the whiteboard, the students constructed a summary in note form.

Who?	
When?	
Where?	
What?	

**Step 6:** Students put the original text away and wrote a paragraph using the summary, which remained on the whiteboard. They were encouraged to provide topic and concluding sentences and to exclude minor details.

After they had written their paragraph, I provided a sample version on OHT, which most students liked to copy. I pointed out my topic and concluding sentences, as well as any linking words I had used. I related the parts of my paragraph to the summary which the class had composed earlier.

**Step 7:** The students completed listening exercises. By this time students were very familiar with the text, both its meaning and vocabulary. The listening exercises were provided at three levels of increasing difficulty to allow for the wide range of listening skills found in the class. The students chose which version they wanted to use. The aims of the exercises were to reinforce, yet again, the new vocabulary. At the same time the exercise developed detailed listening skills, particularly for unstressed function words, crucial to the sense but often missed or misheard by students.



The results of the formal testing are shown below:

- 0 indicates the student took part in the test but had no correct answers.
- A blank indicates the student was absent when the test took place.

**Vocabulary research project — test results**

Student	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Average
1	40	0	0	60	70	34
2	100	80	60	40	70	70
3	50	40		40	60	47.5
4	80	50	40	80	80	66
5	70	50	60	100		70
6	10	40	80	40		43
7	100			60	100	86.7
8	70	80	80	90	80	80
9	90		80	80	100	87.5
10	40	0	0	40		20
11			0	40		20
12		100	80	90	100	92.5
13		75	60	80	40	63.8
14				60	50	55
15				50	60	55
16				60	90	75
<b>Average</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>51.5</b>	<b>49.1</b>	<b>63.1</b>	<b>75.0</b>	<b>60.3</b>

**Focus groups**

The students with the highest test scores reported high satisfaction with all segments of the program. They said they believed that each segment helped reinforce their vocabulary learning. One student commented that she did not need to learn the new words at home because the class work ensured that she remembered them.

Another student suggested that the teacher should always use each new word in a sentence on the board after the class discussion of its meaning. This suggestion was incorporated systematically into subsequent lessons. Of course, words had already been placed in sentences both in the original text and in the exercises, but it was felt that an extra example would do no harm.

More surprisingly, students with the lowest test scores also expressed great satisfaction with each segment of the program. They said they remembered new words better than in previous courses, even though one said that her ‘*computer didn’t click!*’.

**General class discussion**

About the middle of the term, several students decided that the reader was too difficult because there were too many new words. However, the students were unanimous in wanting to know the end of the story and stating that they could understand the plot. In fact, they did not want to abandon the text.

As a result, there was a class discussion about rote-learning techniques and how many words a student should attempt to commit to memory each week. This also reassured them that they did not need to try to learn every word they did not know, but merely the words which the teacher had selected for exercises and testing.

### End-of-course satisfaction survey

Below is a summary of student responses to the reader and related exercises from the end-of-course satisfaction survey.

	Interesting	Boring	Useful	Not useful
Story ( <i>Average Dead Body</i> )	6		3	1
Learning new words	8		3	
Exercises using new words	7		3	
Summary	5		3	2
Writing paragraphs	5	1	5	
Listening	7		4	

### Teacher's impressions

Through the vocabulary project and working with the class I made the following comments:

- The general atmosphere in the class throughout the course was positive, despite negative reports from the previous teachers about the attitudes of a number of the students.
- All students started to think more positively about what they already knew about English words, with many contributing to the discussion on the meanings of unfamiliar words.
- One student, who was initially unwilling to write anything, started to participate actively in the tests and ultimately in paragraph writing.
- Another student, who had previously always copied from whoever was sitting next to him, attempted to write his own answers towards the end of the course.
- About half of the class found paragraph writing extremely difficult but understood the necessity to try. Two of the students with moderately severe literacy problems made appreciable progress in sentence writing, even though they did not achieve anything that could be described, in a formal sense, as a paragraph.
- The choice of text was not appropriate. In retrospect, if no other text was available, this one should have been edited to cut out most of the purely descriptive background atmosphere paragraphs. In this way, a lot of the more challenging vocabulary would have been eliminated and the burden of length would have been relieved for the students. This was in fact done in the last two weeks of the course to ensure that the class actually finished the story, which they were anxious to do.

### Conclusion

In general, I believe the research was a positive experience for both teacher and students. However, with future classes I would make some modifications in line with the following conclusions.

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from these results, especially since there is no basis for comparison with the effects of other previously used teaching techniques. However, some individuals performed better in the formal tests than either they or the teacher would have predicted.

Both in the focus groups and in general class discussion, it is difficult to separate students' real opinions from their desire to please the teacher. However, in both cases, there was a noticeable degree of enthusiasm.

The grid for analysing new words was of less use with this group than with higher-level classes. The sorts of issues raised by the grid were useful in helping the students to analyse what they already knew about the words, both from this text and from their previous English language experience. It also helped the students focus on the text itself, rather than merely on individual words. They were less overwhelmed by unknown words and relied less on looking up new words in the dictionary.

## References

- Baylis, J 2000.** *Average dead body*. Sydney: NSW AMES
- Clarke, D F and P Nation 1980.** 'Guessing the meaning of words from context: Strategy and techniques'. *System*, 8, 3:211–20
- Ellis, N C 1997.** 'Vocabulary acquisition: Word structure, collocation, word-class and meaning'. In N Schmitt and M McCarthy (eds) 1997. *Vocabulary: Description, acquisition and pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press



## Procedure

Each week, I presented the students with a topic vocabulary sheet. The vocabulary was presented in a simple table, with each item numbered and with room to write down meanings in first language. The sheet was inside a plastic sleeve and I explained that they would be given a new sheet each week. They were encouraged to keep the sheets in individual plastic sleeves and to learn the words.

I gave some consideration as to how to sequence the vocabulary on the sheets and toyed with using alphabetical order. However, on the *Family* vocabulary sheet I started with well-known words, eg *father* and *mother*, because the following words — *paternal grandfather* and *maternal grandfather* — provided a logical sequence. Similarly, the order of vocabulary on the *Government* vocabulary sheet was determined by moving from Federal to State to local government. I could not see any advantage in having the English words in alphabetical order when, in fact, the students would not experience words in alphabetical order.

Approximately an hour of class time each week was spent on presentation of vocabulary items, looking at both pronunciation and meaning. This usually happened during the 45 minutes that preceded a ‘conversation hour’ on Wednesdays. The sheets were distributed and the students were asked to see whether any of the vocabulary was familiar to them. I then covered the entire list, in numerical order, ensuring that the students repeated each word two or three times, with the correct stress and pronunciation. I also drew their attention to the number of syllables, where necessary. After the pronunciation of each word, I would give its meaning. The presentation often led to questions from the students about homonyms, synonyms and other words belonging to particular word families, eg *tear* (verb), *hoarse* (adjective) and *humorous* (adjective).

At the end of each week, I gave the students a word sleuth, which incorporated all the words presented that week. I asked the students to do the sleuth for homework. This had a twofold purpose in that it ensured that the students reviewed the vocabulary, as well as giving them a sense of achievement in having conquered the sleuth. This was particularly important since there was no time available for weekly testing.

In Week 7, the students were given the last page of vocabulary, although I had hoped to give them ten sheets (one per week). This was unavoidable, again due to the pressures of completing the syllabus and testing the competencies related to CSWE II.

## Observations

During the course, I observed that students incorporated new vocabulary items, particularly adjectives and verbs, into their speaking and writing. For example, one student referred to another student as *stingy* (albeit jokingly), another said one of the students *dawdled* and yet another described his wife as *talkative* when writing a description of a person. This use of words from the vocabulary sheets was clear evidence that the students benefited from this exercise. I noticed that about 75 per cent of the students had placed each sheet in an individual plastic sleeve.

In Week 8, I conducted a brief oral evaluation of the vocabulary sheets with the students and noted the responses. Originally, I had intended to give the students a questionnaire but abandoned the idea due to time constraints. I used the following questions in the discussion:

- Did you find the vocabulary sheets useful?
- Have the vocabulary sheets helped improve your English?
- Would you like to continue receiving vocabulary sheets?

All of the students said that they had found the vocabulary sheets very useful and agreed that the sheets had helped improve their English. All but two of the students said that they would like to continue to receive vocabulary sheets. They also said that it was helpful to be made aware of words that were important in everyday communication.

## Conclusion

It seems that presenting extra vocabulary (beyond those items that would normally be covered) is of considerable benefit to the students. It would be interesting to see how the students would cope if all the vocabulary sheets were given out at the beginning of the course. Irrespective of whether the sheets were given out at the same time or individually each week, a contents page would probably be handy as a reference.

Based on the success of this project and the enthusiasm of the students, I will continue to use this strategy with my next class.

## 4 Vocabulary development in the Home Tutor Scheme

Colleen Fox

### Background

I was working as a Coordinator of the Home Tutor Scheme in the Australian Capital Territory at the time of the vocabulary project. Part of my role was to provide training for the volunteer tutors, who came from a broad range of backgrounds and experiences. Their main question, when confronted with teaching English to newly arrived migrants and refugees, was: *Where do I start?*

The teaching of English words is usually the agreed starting point. Tutors were interested in how they chose vocabulary that was relevant to their students and how they could help students to store and retrieve this vocabulary. Home tutors are in a unique position in that they can focus their teaching sessions on one student and can tailor materials and teaching to the individual needs of that student. Home tutoring offers a unique way to explore teaching techniques and provides data with direct implications for the ESL classroom.

I joined the vocabulary project because I was particularly interested in exploring a method to facilitate vocabulary learning that would enable useful words to be stored and retained by students. In an article examining ways in which teachers can best help students to store and retrieve words in the target language, Sökmen (1997) advocates *explicit* vocabulary teaching rather than leaving students to infer meaning from context alone. Three of Sökmen's teaching techniques had a particular appeal for me:

- 1 integrate new words with old
- 2 provide a number of encounters with a word
- 3 promote a deep level of processing.

As a classroom teacher, I have always tried to take account of individual learning styles. At a professional development workshop in 2000, presented by Caron Egle, it was suggested that student learning styles are the product of several factors:

- personality type, which can be determined by tests such as Myer Briggs;
- right or left brain preferences;
- brain wave states, ie high arousal, relaxed, deep creativity, deep sleep;
- sense preference in processing, ie visual, auditory, kinaesthetic;
- multiple intelligence theory.

According to multiple intelligence theory, there are eight intelligence types:

- 1 verbal/linguistic intelligence, which is awakened by discussions, reading and writing;
- 2 mathematical/logical intelligence, which is awakened by problem solving and logical thinking;
- 3 visual/spatial intelligence, which is awakened by an *inner guidance system*;
- 4 musical/rhythmic intelligence, which is awakened by recognition of rhythm, tonal patterns and sensitivity to sounds;

- 5 body/kinaesthetic intelligence, which is awakened by the use of body for movement, expressing emotion and learning by doing;
- 6 interpersonal intelligence, which is awakened by working cooperatively and communicating effectively with others;
- 7 intrapersonal intelligence, which is awakened by the *internal* self;
- 8 spiritual intelligence.

Multiple intelligence theory proposes that this kaleidoscope of learning styles leads every individual to have a unique combination of intelligences, which means a unique, individual learning style.

This view of a kaleidoscope of learning styles prompted me to focus on an issue to explore through action research:

*If tutors can tune into some aspect of student learning styles, a more appropriate selection of vocabulary materials and teaching methods can be made, which should result in better learning for their students.*

It seemed to me that if teaching strategies could incorporate all three of Sökmen's techniques and take into account learning styles, then student success with learning vocabulary should be increased. Vocabulary learning materials that were explicit and reflected different learning styles would lead to vocabulary being more easily stored in the memory for use when needed.

## The project

### The students

The students in this research were a typical sample of Home Tutor Scheme students, ranging in language levels from beginner to intermediate and coming from a variety of language backgrounds. These students were incorporated into the project because their tutors had responded to a general survey on vocabulary teaching and had volunteered to be part of the trialling of different vocabulary learning materials.

### The structure

In my research I asked tutors to:

- focus on student learning styles
- trial three different kinds of materials — visual, listening and action
- evaluate the effectiveness of these materials on student vocabulary learning.

My research project was conducted over three stages:

- Stage 1: A survey was sent to all current tutors, including those who had been matched and those who remained unmatched with students. The survey asked for their ideas on teaching vocabulary. I asked for volunteers to trial some vocabulary teaching materials and methods.
- Stage 2: The second stage of the project was the preparation of a vocabulary package for 36 tutors, including some information on learning styles and positive learning strategies.
- Stage 3: On receipt of the package, tutors were asked to undertake three activities with their students, complete a follow-up exercise and then evaluate the whole process on the sheets provided.

### The survey on teaching vocabulary

The aim of the following survey was to focus tutor attention on their vocabulary work.

**Survey: Teaching vocabulary**  
*Please tick your answer, or complete as appropriate.*

1 In your current tutoring sessions, how much time on average is spent on vocabulary (other than speaking, listening, reading, writing or grammar)?

Less than 10%                       50%                       Your % estimate  
 25%                                       More than 50%

Comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2 Do you plan some vocabulary work for each session?

Yes                                       No

If yes, how do you choose the vocabulary?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3 Does the student's level of English (beginner, post-beginner, intermediate or advanced) affect the time spent on teaching vocabulary in your sessions?

Yes                                       No

Please explain your answer:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4 What methods do you use to explain vocabulary?

Bilingual dictionary                       Using pictures, photographs                       Using opposites  
 English dictionary                       Drawing                       Using mime and gesture  
 Using actual objects                       Explain using simpler English                       Using experiences or stories to give a context

Any other methods:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Continued next page



The response rate to the survey was approximately 32 per cent. Many tutors, by phone and in person, showed a great deal of interest in the participation of the Home Tutor Scheme in a national project.

It was not surprising to hear that more than half of the tutors consciously spent at least 25 per cent of their tutoring sessions on vocabulary, as most of their students were new arrivals at beginner and post-beginner levels of English. Two tutors stated that they 'were always dealing with vocabulary' and that 'it was spread throughout the lesson'.

Of the 36 respondents to the survey, 25 reported that they planned vocabulary activities for each weekly session. They employed a wide range of strategies, such as reading exercises, theme work (for example, health, food, signs), picture discussions, and followed student interests and hobbies (for example, gardening, recipes, cars, shopping and cricket). It was refreshing to read about innovative techniques that tutors had used to explain vocabulary. Many stressed the importance of presenting the new vocabulary in a meaningful context.

This survey also revealed that student retention of new vocabulary was an important issue in session planning. Repetition and revision, writing new vocabulary in sentences, personal vocabulary books, tape recordings of new words, games, spelling tests and homework exercises were some of the strategies outlined by the tutors.

Most tutors reported various strategies they used to encourage their students to take responsibility for developing vocabulary outside the weekly sessions. For example, they encouraged them to read newspapers and magazines, to join community conversation groups, to watch TV, to listen to the radio, to write letters to tutors, and to read and listen to stories with their children. They also encouraged students to keep a diary of words or situations they did not understand, which provided material for the next tutoring session.

Overall, the survey revealed a group of conscientious, creative volunteer tutors who focused a significant amount of time and energy on vocabulary teaching. The themes and subjects addressed in tutoring sessions were relevant to the immediate needs and interests of their students. However, the question that remained was: *How can tutors choose the kinds of materials and activities that lead to the most effective learning?*

### The materials package

I decided to develop a package of materials for each tutor to trial over one or more sessions. I wanted the theme of the vocabulary learning to be part of the process of assessing learning styles, and therefore I chose the topic *School Days*. I hoped that conversations between tutors and students on this topic would reveal the educational culture of each student, the teaching methods the students had experienced and how the students went about learning in their countries. The packages were designed to cater for a variety of levels with plenty of visual material.

Because of the range of English levels and educational backgrounds of the students, I designed a package that consisted of three activities and two A3 cover sheets with plenty of picture material. On the first A3 page, there were real-life pictures of children in school and in class, with comments from these children about what things they liked and what they wanted to do when they were older. The second page consisted of stylised pictures of school classrooms with vocabulary listed from picture dictionaries.

The three activities in the package are outlined in the following table.



Tutor

## SCHOOL

**1. What words can you write or remember?  
Add them to the picture e.g. 'teacher'.**

walked to school - later by car.

play ground  
desks chair  
Blackboard chalk dust  
Rules pencil rubber  
Staff room

Primary School      e.g. teacher  
8.30 - 2.30 winter  
8.00 - 2.00 summer  
Colin Stenrod Barry Westling  
Location  
Estcourt, small country town.



Cycled to school

Assembly Hall  
Sports grounds  
Music room, piano, sheet music  
Canteen      recorders  
Science Block equipment  
Swimming pool.  
High School Winter 8.30 - 3.30  
   Summer  
Favourite teacher (English) Mr. Hosking,  
Pat Bennett, Margie Taylor.  
Small country town as boarder

Name: Nuzhat

Country  
For School:

Year of Birth: 6 9 33

**2. Turn over a word card. Talk about this word in your school days. Add words to your picture above.**

**3. Draw a picture showing a classroom or your school.**

Tutors were asked to trial each of the activities and to gauge the responses of their students, observing the effectiveness of each activity in learning vocabulary. These activities were chosen to focus on the sensory processing of students (one of the eight identified factors in exploring learning styles) and as one way of exploring student preferences for materials and tutoring styles in learning new vocabulary.

A final task suggested to tutors was to ask students to tell stories about their school days in whatever format they preferred (in pictures, through an oral story or through the written word via pen or computer). Also included were notes on learning styles and some insights on *positive learning*. The transcript below is Nuzhat's story about school.

My name is Nuzhat. I was born and went to school in Pakistan. It was a girls school. I was lucky my school was opposite my home. I enjoyed school very much because everyone was friendly. I had seven subjects: English, Urdu, Maths, Islamic Studies, Science, Social Studies and Household.

I had different timetable in summer and winter. In summer school was open at 7.30 am and closed at 2.00 pm. In winter it was 7.30 to 3.00 pm.

The happiest time was at recess when we was free to play games and talk happily to each other.

## The results

More than 30 matched tutors had indicated an interest in trialling the materials and approaches. Unfortunately, the trialling period included the Olympic Games and a three-week holiday in the ACT, and many tutors and students had agreed on postponement of tutoring sessions. Also, several tutors had plans for short-term overseas travel to coincide with the Olympics. Nonetheless, I received more than 50 per cent of the evaluation sheets for the project. The evaluation questions and some of the responses are outlined as follows.



- *It confirmed for me how much my student at this level relies on the visual to learn. I didn't realise until I looked back in her notebook how often I draw pictures to assist meaning in our sessions.*
- *Yes ... She preferably learns by hearing (pounces on new words).*
- *This topic confirmed my experience that this student responds well to pictures, concrete objects, large print in small doses and easy tapes and questions.*
- *Subject matter relevant to student, certainly evoked more reaction and effort to contribute. Listening was least preference ... other styles best.*
- *Yes ... She seemed most comfortable with speaking, pronouncing when we wrote things or read. She also told me she prefers to learn words in context.*
- *When asked to write words, my student started writing complete sentences. ... I felt she wanted to tell a full story, not just isolated uncorrected words.*
- *To some extent. I had already ascertained that pictures and words were best and had been doing these with her, like rooms of the house, parts of the body etc and using pictures ... matching words. We do exercises and dialogues.*
- *Yes. It showed [my student] understands better by doing.*

## Conclusion

This action research project suggested that learning of vocabulary is maximised when the materials and teaching method are matched to the student's preferred way of processing, be it kinaesthetic, auditory, visual or a combination of these. It became apparent that students made clear choices in terms of their preferred styles of learning.

Beginners who found the listening exercises difficult chose to learn new words from a combination of pictures and conversation. Others liked the variety of tasks in Activity 1. The preferred activities led to the discussion of new words, which the students recorded for retention. The students used the vocabulary in conversation and in written sentences. The theme *School Days* proved to be very popular with the students and provided opportunities for cultural exchanges between tutors and students. This theme was relevant to students and allowed them to speak from their own experiences, promoting the learning of vocabulary and improving the retention of new words.

New words were learned in an environment that was productive for each student's style of learning. In each of the activities, students were given opportunities to share their experiences, as well as learning and hearing about other experiences. The self-selection of an activity that best suited their learning style elicited an enthusiastic response.

In terms of Sökmen's (1997) *explicit* vocabulary teaching, the students were actively 'integrating new words with the old'. The exchange of stories between tutors and students, and the variety of exercises in each activity, 'provided a number of encounters with a word'. Students were able to choose the most appropriate way of relating their stories, which 'promoted a deep level of processing'. Tutors who accommodate the learning styles of their students can incorporate these three teaching techniques to optimise student success rates at learning and retaining vocabulary.

As described in the early part of this report, individual learning styles are the product of a number of factors, one of which is the sensory processing choice (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic). The teaching of vocabulary in ESL is an ongoing process in the acquisition of new language. Teachers have a range of materials from which to choose. It is easy for teachers to fall into the trap of teaching vocabulary in a way that suits their

own learning styles. This research confirmed the need for all teachers and tutors to become acquainted with the learning styles of their students as quickly as possible so that the appropriate sensory processing can be utilised for students to efficiently learn and retain new words.

The ACT Home Tutor Scheme is a very active program. I was genuinely delighted by the amount of tutor interest generated by the invitation to take part in the AMEP Research Centre Vocabulary Project. Tutor responses have indicated that the chance to participate in this research has been a stimulant to their tutoring, in addition to providing some unique insights into the way individual students respond to learning materials and teaching approaches. The one-to-one basis of tutoring means that tutors receive immediate feedback, which provides valuable individual evaluation for research purposes. I would recommend that tutors participate in future research projects.

## References

- Egle, C. Learning styles seminar at Education Development Centre, Canberra Institute of Technology, August 2000
- Sökmen, A J 1997. 'Current trends in teaching second language vocabulary'. In N Schmitt and M McCarthy (eds) 1997. *Vocabulary: Description, acquisition and pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

## Source materials for package

Listening materials:

Cornish, S 1993. *Making contact: Your child's school*. Sydney: NSW AMES

*It's over to you*. Sydney: NCELTR

Stories:

*I remember school this way*. Recollections of AMES students, Hobart 1984. The school pictures were from a local school publication in the ACT. As all names were erased, the school had no hesitation in approving the use of this material.

## 5 Vocabulary and a CSWE II class

Bill Derham

### Background

In the term before the project, I had used the Victorian AMES website, the Virtual Independent Learning Centre, on a weekly basis with a CSWE II class. The section I used was *Easy News*. However, the news did not prove easy for my class because of difficulties with vocabulary. After preparing various worksheets to build a bridge between my students and the online texts, I decided that certain themes and topics were repeated frequently on *Easy News* and in other news sources. I thought that if I could prepare simple worksheets around topic-based vocabulary, then I would be able to build a foundation for the students to grasp the news much more readily.

I developed and taught one worksheet that took a whole hour to teach. However, I thought this time was justified if it made essential topics more accessible to the students. This led me to the idea of writing a series of topic-based worksheets to teach vocabulary.

The class I taught while undertaking the project was also a CSWE II class, but they were a slow class. This provided a challenge and a useful learning experience for me, because this class found the worksheet difficult, forcing me to rethink and adapt my approach. I concluded that news bulletins were too demanding, so I developed worksheets to teach vocabulary relevant to the curriculum and the needs of CSWE II students. The worksheets were also used by teachers with other CSWE II classes. I gathered feedback from these teachers and informally evaluated the responses of my own students. My aim was to adapt the materials and their use based on observation and informal evaluation.

### Procedure and observations

I presented different worksheets over a three-week period as set out below:

**Week 1:**

**Worksheet focus:** Classification of words into general categories such as: *furniture, industries, insects, animals, containers, metals, building materials, hand tools* and *things with buttons*.



**Comments:**

There were 130 words on the sheet and the students found it difficult. I did not want the vocabulary teaching to be heavy going, so I gave the conversation game *20 Questions* as a follow-up exercise. This is a variation on the old game *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*. This proved successful, although the students did not explore the potential of the game very deeply or extensively. Their language capacity was too limited. The beauty of the game is that it can be played at a low, simple level, or a highly sophisticated level. I gave the students a worksheet with a large range of ready-made questions that they could use in the game (see following worksheet). These questions were designed to teach useful language and the skills of description and analysis.

What is it? Questions for a conversation game		
Is it made of metal? Is it made of gold? Is it made of wood? Is it made of paper? Is it made of plastic? Is it made of glass? Is it made of rubber? Is it made of wool? Is it made of cotton? Is it made of leather? Is it made of synthetic fabric? Is it made of nylon? Is it made of polyester? Is it made of plastic and metal? Is it made of metal and wood?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you drink it?</li> <li>• Can you eat it?</li> <li>• Can you pick it up in your hand?</li> <li>• Can you put it in your pocket?</li> <li>• Can you cut it with a knife?</li> <li>• Can you see it?</li> <li>• Can you hear it?</li> <li>• Can you drive it?</li> <li>• Can you buy it in a supermarket?</li> <li>• Can you get inside it?</li> <li>• Can you sit on it?</li> <li>• Can you wear it?</li> </ul>	Is it a hand tool? Is it an electrical appliance? Is it a machine? Is it a vehicle? Is it a container? Is it a piece of furniture? Is it an article of clothing? Is it an accessory? Is it a piece of jewellery? Is it an ornament? Is it a cleaning product? Is it a cosmetic product? Is it crockery? Is it cutlery? Is it a part of something?
Is it liquid? Is it a gas? Is it solid? Is it hard? Is it soft? Is it beautiful?	Can you read it? Can you write with it? Can you use it to communicate? Can you play music with it? Can you make pictures with it?	Can you cook with it? Can you prepare food with it? Can you clean your house with it? Can you make a hole with it?

Continued next page



**What is my secret occupation?**

Do you work in a factory?  
 Do you work in a school?  
 Do you work in a hospital?  
 Do you work in a shop?  
 Do you work in a mine?  
 Do you work in a forest?  
 Do you work in a car?

Do you work on a farm?  
 Do you work in a bus?  
 Do you work on a ship?  
 Do you work on a construction site?  
 Do you work in an office?  
 Do you work on a plane?  
 Do you work in a laboratory?

Do you use a computer?  
 Do you use a typewriter?  
 Do you use expensive equipment?  
 Do you use a telephone?  
 Do you use hand tools?  
 Do you use a paintbrush?  
 Do you use a pen?  
 Do you use garden tools?  
 Do you use power tools?  
 Do you use a two-way radio?  
 Do you use a mobile phone?  
 Do you use a cash register?

Do you get dirty at work?  
 Do you get good money?

Did you have to study at university?  
 Are you a professional person?  
 Are you a tradesperson?  
 Do you need to be physically strong?  
 Do you need to be very intelligent?  
 Do you need to talk a lot at work?

Do you need to speak different languages?

Do you need to have a driver's licence?  
 Do you need to read a lot at work?  
 Do you need to drive a car at work?  
 Do you need skilful hands?  
 Do you need to be a good talker?

Do you always work indoors?  
 Do you always work outdoors?  
 Do you drive from house to house?  
 Do you travel long distances in your work?

Do you sell things?  
 Do you clean things?  
 Do you repair things?  
 Do you make things?  
 Do you design things?  
 Do you make pictures?

Do you supervise other workers?  
 Do you make a lot of decisions?  
 Do you have to think a lot at work?  
 Do you wear elegant clothes at work?  
 Do you wear formal clothes at work?  
 Do you wear a safety helmet?  
 Do you wear a uniform?

Do you talk to customers?  
 Do you sometimes work alone?  
 Do you often work alone?  
 Do you often travel overseas?  
 Do you sometimes travel overseas?  
 Is your work dangerous?  
 Are you a technician?

Does your work have very high status?  
 Does your work have high status?  
 Does your work have medium status?  
 Does your work have low status?

Do you help people in your work?  
 Do you work with sick people?  
 Do you work with children?



**Comments:** The students still needed a lot of teaching to understand all the vocabulary and to do the exercises. For example, one of the worksheets focused on words for occupations, with a follow-up lesson involving another game of *20 Questions*. The vocabulary worksheet was a good preparation for the game, because the students benefited from having their vocabulary enlarged before playing a game on the same topic. In addition, the game helped them to practise and extend their vocabulary on the topic.

**Week 3:**  
**Worksheet focus:** I gave out another large worksheet, where words were presented in conceptual or topical groups. This time I reduced it from 130 words to 110 words. I also gave the class two worksheets applying the vocabulary already covered, but this time using the words in a sentence-based activity. In addition, I wrote and presented a worksheet consisting of a fairly dense expository text explaining the basics of banking (see worksheet below).

**BANKING**

Banking is a very important service industry in Australia. There are four big Australian banks that dominate the industry. They are the National Bank of Australia (NAB), the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA), Westpac Bank and the Australian and New Zealand Bank (ANZ). There are also some smaller banks that operate mainly in one State. The main State bank in WA is Bank West. Banking is an important service and it is hard to live without a bank account. Even Centrelink pays pensions and benefits directly into bank accounts.

Banks offer many excellent services. You can deposit or withdraw money any time from an ATM. There are ATMs in every city and suburban shopping centre. You can also withdraw money from your bank account at any supermarket and at many post offices. Banking is very easy if you can use an ATM. Of course, you cannot use an ATM if you forget your 4-digit PIN number, so you must remember it. Your PIN number is also secret. Don't tell anyone your PIN number. You can also pay bills on the telephone and you can do bank transactions on the Internet.

Banks offer so many wonderful services, but many people don't like banks. Why is that? Banks are big businesses and they make big profits. Bank services are also not free. If you use an ATM, you pay a fee of about 50 cents or \$1. If you forget your PIN number or you don't like computers, you can go into a bank branch. You can deposit or withdraw money or you can check your account balance over the counter. But you pay for the service. Some transactions are free, but some are not free. Transaction fees are sometimes quite expensive. You can pay \$2 or \$3 just to withdraw \$10 from your savings bank account! If you use EFTPOS to pay for your shopping at the supermarket, you also pay a fee. It is a good idea to learn to use an ATM. It is much cheaper than over-the-counter transactions. Many older people really don't like banks because they don't like computer technology. They can't use an ATM and they find it difficult to learn. 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks.'

THERE ARE SOME WORDS THAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND AND SOME NEW WORDS THAT YOU NEED TO LEARN. WRITE THESE WORDS HERE.

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# SECTION TWO

## *Programming*

### **1 *Competencies and vocabulary***

Beverley Proudfoot

### **2 *Developing ESP vocabulary in the ESL classroom***

Cheryl Pfister

### **3 *What do students think about vocabulary learning?***

Elena Baron

### **4 *The love of my life: a thematic approach to teaching vocabulary***

Judy O'Keeffe

### **5 *Using personal stories to teach the language of settlement***

Lyn Govendir

## Introduction

The introduction of vocabulary systematically into the classroom requires a reassessment of how to integrate vocabulary development into the overall teaching program. Teachers need to decide whether to deal with vocabulary as an aspect of each classroom activity, as it arises, or whether to develop a more systematic approach to dealing with vocabulary related to themes or specific texts. The teachers in this section have taken a range of approaches to programming for vocabulary. Vocabulary is approached through a focus on themes, the development of a weekly list, a focus on activity types or the choice of a particular text. Another interesting approach outlined in this section is to hand the decision about what vocabulary to learn over to the students.

Beverley Proudfoot is a teacher in Western Australia. Her concern was to encourage her mixed-level students to become independent learners by developing strategies to increase their vocabulary. Beverley worked from the basis of a weekly vocabulary list, which the students worked with in various ways. Students were tested each week on the list, which increased their commitment to learning the words. Over the course of the project, her students used the vocabulary file they had built up rather than their dictionaries when writing various texts for the CSWE competencies.

Cheryl Pfister works at a small teaching centre in Hobart. Her interest in the project came from her experience as an EPRS teacher where she found students unable to describe their work experience through lack of vocabulary. With her CSWE III students, Cheryl set up a framework within which students could develop vocabulary in an area of their choice. This individualised approach to ESP vocabulary development utilised a range of resources including textbooks, newspapers, technical books and CD-ROMs, and led to increased confidence and independence on the part of the students.

Elena Baron, in AMES Victoria, decided to focus on different ways of presenting vocabulary in class. She adopted seven different methods and asked the students to comment on their effectiveness. Through focusing on how they developed new vocabulary, Elena's students came to feel more in control of the language learning process.

Judy O'Keeffe works in the ACT. She decided to present new vocabulary to her CSWE II students through a set of *universal* themes, as a means of making the process more stimulating. Within each theme, Judy presented vocabulary through the four macro skills and integrated volunteer tutors into reinforcing the themes and the new vocabulary. She also asked her students to keep journals, as a means of recording their responses to the themes, and sight vocabulary notepads. At the end of each week, she introduced an element of competition into the classroom and, with a stopwatch, gave the students two minutes to write down all the vocabulary they associated with the week's theme. Overall, her students increased their use and retention of the new vocabulary.

Lyn Govendir introduced new vocabulary through reading and listening. She introduced her CSWE II class at the Institute of Languages at the University of New South Wales to the language of settlement through migrant experience stories. The students listened to and read the stories of migrants who have been in Australia for a long time. They then completed a range of exercises related to the stories. Lyn found that presenting vocabulary through more than one sensory mode, as well as the human interest aspect of the stories, improved acquisition of new vocabulary.

# 1 *Competencies and vocabulary*

**Beverley Proudfoot**

## The research setting

My research focused on a CSWE II class and took place over a period of ten weeks. The students attended class for three hours a day, five days a week.

The 11 students in the class were mainly from Bosnia, with one from Macedonia and another from Romania. All the students had been in Australia for a similar length of time and had similar English language learning experiences and educational backgrounds. The main differences in the group were in terms of age and contact with English outside the classroom. The class included some younger students who were socialising with native speakers outside the classroom. As this was a mixed-phase class, the ASLPR levels were quite disparate, ranging from 1– through to 2 across the macro skills.

## The research focus

The focus of my project was to encourage the students to become independent learners, through the development of learning strategies to assist in vocabulary development. This involved setting a formal vocabulary program that the students completed every week. At the end of the research period, the students had created a mini vocabulary file to take with them to their next course.

## The process

I began this project by giving each student a work project folder. These were simple, hard but flexible, coloured folders that contained clear plastic protector sheets. Originally, I collected the files and kept them with me but I later allowed the students to keep the files. I asked the students to bring their files to class and I encouraged them to use them throughout the lessons, particularly when the lesson was centered on preparing for a particular CSWE II competency.

On Friday, I would give the students a list of vocabulary words to learn. The number of words in each list varied from week to week but averaged about 15 words per week. I tried to make the vocabulary lists manageable for the Phase One students, while at the same time providing the Phase Two students with a challenge.

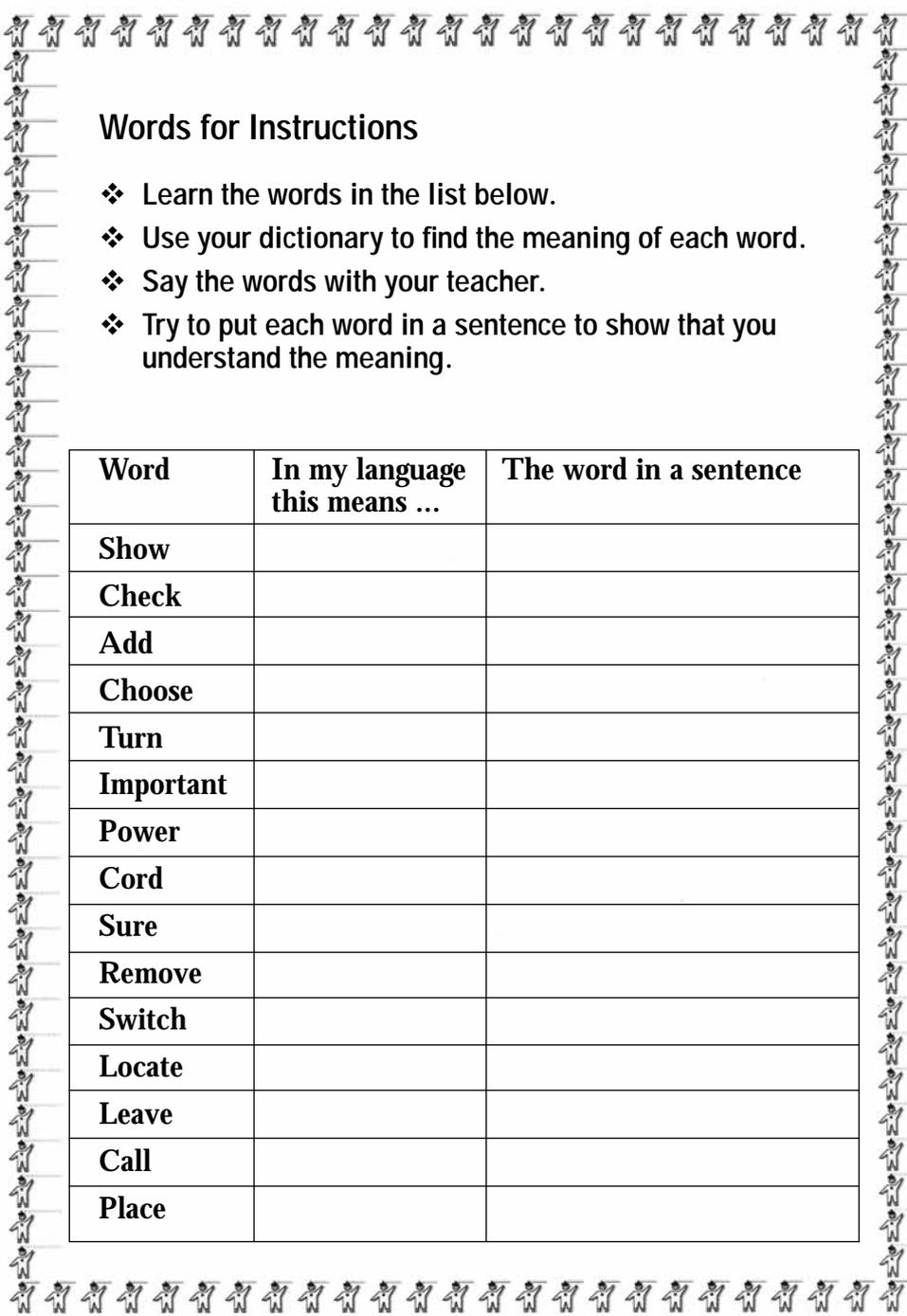
The students were instructed to:

- 1 learn the words in the list
- 2 use the dictionary to find the meaning of each word
- 3 say the words with the teacher
- 4 try to put each word in a sentence to show understanding of meaning.

I provided the following format for the students.

Word	In my language this means ...	The word in a sentence





### Words for Instructions

- ❖ Learn the words in the list below.
- ❖ Use your dictionary to find the meaning of each word.
- ❖ Say the words with your teacher.
- ❖ Try to put each word in a sentence to show that you understand the meaning.

Word	In my language this means ...	The word in a sentence
Show		
Check		
Add		
Choose		
Turn		
Important		
Power		
Cord		
Sure		
Remove		
Switch		
Locate		
Leave		
Call		
Place		

The overall outcomes for this project were that the students developed independent, regular strategies to learn new words each week. They also were able to produce an effective vocabulary file that would assist them in future courses.

### Reflections

To ask your students to commit to extra homework is taking a risk. Fortunately my class, as a motivated group of language learners who were prepared to extend

themselves, rose to the occasion. I was surprised at their enthusiasm for spelling tests, as my personal style of teaching does not usually incorporate this mode of assessment. I was also obliged to recognise the effectiveness of repetition when learning new vocabulary. The puzzle worksheets, which I introduced in Week 4, were significant in their effectiveness to help reinforce new words. I was worried that they were too monotonous because they used the same words over and over, but student feedback was extremely positive.

In conclusion, the project has reminded me how essential vocabulary teaching is to language learners. Although I aimed the word lists at the CSWE competencies, I hope that the project gave my students the opportunity to develop their own learning strategies to increase their personal second language vocabulary.

## 2 Developing ESP vocabulary in the ESL classroom

Cheryl Pfister

### Background

I work as a full-time teacher in the AMEP in Hobart, a small centre that caters for the ESL needs of migrants, refugees and international fee-paying students. The class involved in the action research project consisted of eight international fee-paying students, three newly arrived refugees and one migrant.

For 12 years I had worked as an Educational Placement and Referral Services (EPRS) teacher. Part of my role was to assist students with pathway counselling, recognition of qualifications and work experience. I became increasingly aware of the frustration experienced by students who were unable to describe their vocational skills, experience and recreational interests because of restrictions in vocabulary. It did not seem to matter how competent a student was in general English, their vocabulary in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was consistently lacking.

As a classroom practitioner, I was also aware of the difficulties and restrictions in catering for the needs of individual students in areas beyond general English.

An idea I had nurtured for some time was that students would welcome the opportunity to become familiar with the jargon of a subject of interest to them. I view the acquisition of ESP terminology as having positive affective outcomes for the students, enabling them to communicate effectively and with confidence. Part of this assumption is that students want to develop ESP vocabulary but do not know how or where to start, which texts to trust and how to use isolated vocabulary items in context.

### The research context

I taught this full-time class for 14 hours a week and they had two other teachers for the remainder of the week. The class was studying the CSWE III Study Focus syllabus strand in the final term of the year.

There was a core group of 12 students who were involved in the vocabulary project — seven males and five females. All of the students had completed secondary school and six students had either partially completed or completed a university degree in their home countries. For a variety of reasons, several other students came and went during the term and were involved with the action research in a peripheral way.

The following table provides a profile of the core group of 12 students.

International fee-paying students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in Tasmania for varying lengths of time, ranging from two weeks to eight months</li> <li>• nationalities: Thai, Japanese and Korean</li> <li>• 18 to 24 years</li> <li>• all studying to enhance their career opportunities on return to their home countries</li> </ul>
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Refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• three newly arrived Sudanese siblings who had quite clear learner pathways, intending to study at a Senior Secondary College in the following year</li> <li>• entered class one week after arrival in Australia</li> <li>• male twins of 17 and a sister of 24 years</li> </ul>
Migrant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• female Chilean who was a qualified journalist who intended to work in this area in Australia</li> </ul>

## The research

Although the genre approach to language teaching and learning provides students with the skills to unpack text, limited vocabulary can stymie clear and satisfying comprehension in both reading and spoken language. Recently, there has been a growing awareness in ESL contexts that students need more vocabulary to increase access to reading for both study and pleasure.

I set up a framework in which students could develop vocabulary in an area of their choice, with them taking responsibility for their own learning. The reality is that because ESP is so specific to individuals, only they can differentiate and identify what is of real interest and what is only peripheral to their needs. I am only able to make guesses because of the breadth of each subject area. This was really brought home to me when three of the students said that they wanted to study the language of biology. It was only on further probing and investigation that they were able to be specific about what micro areas of biology they wished to concentrate on. Useful development of ESP will only result when based on self-identified student needs.

Accessing and acquiring accurate, specific terminology can be daunting for the unassisted student. My goals were to:

- provide opportunities for ongoing links to resources
- provide support and encouragement that would enable the students to establish realistic, short-term achievable goals
- establish self-monitoring of what was appropriate and useful.

Students were provided with access to resources: books, Internet sites, CD-ROMs, personnel and other training organisations. The cooperation and assistance of the librarian was greatly appreciated.

Another reason for approaching the action research in this way was that I wanted to be able to see what the students could learn without me. My own curiosity was a factor in determining this area for action research.

## The action research

The action research was explained to the class and their agreement to participate was sought. After the first day it was referred to as *The Vocab Project*. All students recognised the limitations of acquiring ESP in a general English class and were very positive in their responses to the project.

The students were asked to nominate an area of specific vocabulary that they wanted to focus on and develop. I suggested study, work or recreation needs. I was present at three scheduled sessions for a total of 21 hours. A fourth session was scheduled for student presentations. Additional time was given to research in self-nominated hours.

It was essential that students never viewed the vocabulary project as meaning that they had to find information on a particular topic to produce a report. The student presentations were designed to indicate to me and to other class members what had been discovered. The presentations were low key and could be given in verbal, visual or written form and could be formal or informal.

The students discussed an approach that sounded prescriptive and linear — an approach that, ultimately, was not pursued. However, it was a starting point and it did result in a focus on achievable outcomes. It was only the route that changed, not the destination. Students explored their subject areas along varied, circuitous routes. The suggested approach was to look at vocabulary sequentially.

- Week 1: Definitions and categories. Names of equipment, tools, objects. Mainly nouns.
- Week 2: Verbs and phrases. An awareness of the collocations involved in moving from individual vocabulary items to sentences, consequences, results, relationships.
- Week 3: Preparing presentation that would incorporate new vocabulary. Words and clauses in context.
- Week 4: Presentation and comments on the usefulness of new vocabulary and the confidence associated with access and retrieval.

## Resources

Reading is generally viewed as being the primary source of vocabulary extension. However, I wanted students to have access to other resources as well. The AMES Independent Learning Centre provided a wide variety of written material: visual, reference, dictionaries, technical books, ESL/ESP textbooks, newspapers and journals. There was also a variety of CD-ROMs, specifically in the areas of science and mathematics, and computers with Internet access. The CD-ROMs had never been used, despite the fact that they had been there for student use for over one year.

The students needed a well-defined starting point and, on the first day of the project, I spread the resources over several tables. They were leapt upon with great glee and delight, accompanied by cries of joy as if the students had been presented with a treasure chest. This material had not been accessed by the students before, although it was not new.

Over the next two weeks other resources were made available, as required. One student sought help from a student teacher on how to read music. Two other students organised to sit in on a tourism lecture at TAFE, where they were instructed in the Galileo system of international travel reservations. Another student went to talk to a salesman in a car yard.

The Internet proved to be invaluable in identifying up-to-date and otherwise unavailable material. Because of their educational backgrounds, all but the newly arrived Sudanese had sophisticated computer skills. However, the Sudanese developed these skills quickly and used the CD-ROMs.

## Areas of vocabulary chosen

The following table outlines the ESP vocabulary choices made by the students, their reasons for choosing specific fields and the results.



Student 6	The Newspaper	<p><b>Reasons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broad choice that remained unfocused</li> </ul> <p><b>Results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no obvious vocabulary outcomes</li> <li>• enjoyed time available to peruse the paper and to distinguish between the different written genres, eg factual reporting, letters of opinion to the Editor, language of advertising and cultural factors</li> </ul>
Student 7	Language for use in Tourist Agency	<p><b>Reasons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is determined to find employment in this industry on return to Tokyo</li> <li>• general English was strong and she saw this as an attribute for gaining employment in a travel agency</li> </ul> <p><b>Results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College of Hospitality in Hobart was cooperative and she spent time there both in classes and in using the library</li> <li>• interested in the language of communication</li> </ul>
Student 8	Magnetism and Energy in Physics	<p><b>Reasons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• intention to study science at Senior Secondary College next year</li> <li>• believed chance to look at this language in context, to be sure of the pronunciation and usage, would be an advantage for him</li> </ul>
Student 9	Bangkok	<p><b>Reasons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on return to Thailand hoped to work as a tour guide</li> <li>• wanted to be able to describe this city to tourists as he knows it</li> <li>• hoped to deviate from the usual tour guide patter and explain alternative aspects</li> </ul>
Student 10	Biology or Gardening  Enzymes in Humans	<p><b>Reasons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• both subjects discussed because of the dilemma of doing something with a recreational focus or something to assist further study</li> <li>• after some frustration, selected enzymes in humans</li> <li>• intended pathway to study at Senior Secondary College and then specialise in medicine or pharmacy</li> </ul> <p><b>Results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• became totally absorbed in vocabulary expansion</li> </ul>
Student 11	Structure and Operation of Import/Export Company	<p><b>Reasons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a work background in a large import and export company in Thailand</li> <li>• ambitious for future to seek a high position in an established company or begin his own</li> <li>• anticipated he would need to give presentations to large groups of people in English</li> </ul> <p><b>Results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developed a generic presentation that could be adapted and used as a model</li> </ul>

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Student 12	Journalism	<p><b>Reasons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• qualified journalist who intended to work in this profession once language skills were adequate</li> <li>• wanted to develop the jargon necessary for discourse with other journalists and newspaper colleagues</li> </ul> <p><b>Results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• this project enabled her to begin on this pathway</li> <li>• realised an organised period of Work Experience was the next logical step</li> </ul>
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## Presentations

The purpose of the presentation was to indicate the focus area of language. In some cases, where students were very specific and detailed about the vocabulary they had acquired, interest was challenged. I interpreted this as measured success of an ESP exercise in that language of interest to, and necessary for, one student might have no relevance to another.

The presentations included:

- sophisticated overheads
- a song written and sung in English
- an explanation of the computerised Galileo system of international travel and hotel reservations
- a simulated bus tour of Bangkok
- a car salesman giving a sales pitch
- a follow-through on a hot tip for a newspaper story and the process of getting it to print.

## Self-evaluation

The self-evaluation carried out by each participant was important and significant as a tool for evaluating the action research. The questions and results of the self-evaluation are outlined in the following table.

Questions	Results
What resources did you use?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 students used books</li> <li>• 6 students used the Internet</li> <li>• 4 students talked to people</li> <li>• 3 students used newspapers</li> <li>• 3 students used brochures</li> <li>• 2 students went on visits</li> <li>• 2 students used CD-ROMs</li> <li>• 1 student used other resources, eg video</li> </ul>
How useful has this project been to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 students found the project very useful</li> <li>• 6 students found the project useful</li> <li>• 0 students found the project not useful</li> </ul>
How confident do you feel about using this new vocabulary?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 students felt very confident</li> <li>• 8 students felt quite confident</li> <li>• 0 students felt unconfident</li> </ul>

## Findings

The students felt more confident about their ability to take responsibility for ESP vocabulary acquisition after being guided into this domain. They needed a starting point and a strategy, which included the identification of resources and a manageable task.

In acknowledging the total person in an ESL classroom, ESP can provide the student with the skills to contribute information about prior study, employment, hobbies and experiences. As the ESL curriculum increases in linguistic difficulty, the ESP parameters need to be extended. The CSWE III students were particularly receptive to developing ESP because of their future goals.

From my perspective came the knowledge that ESP is not an unmanageable area of an ESL classroom, requiring diverse knowledge and individual preparation. It requires setting up opportunities, offering support and, finally, trusting the students to use their time effectively.

For the students, there is an increase in confidence because of the acquisition and retrieval of new words. As one student said: *These new words are part of me now. I own them.*

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### 3 What do students think about vocabulary learning?

Elena Baron

#### Aims of the research

The aims of my action research project were to find out:

- what students thought about vocabulary learning
- the most efficient ways for teachers to present new vocabulary.

#### The class

During the project, I was teaching a ten-week CSWE IV evening class held for two and a half hours twice a week. The students were very diverse, as seen in the following class profile.

Language level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 0 to 0+ on the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR)</li></ul>
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• equal numbers of males and females</li></ul>
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ranging from 25 to 56</li></ul>
Length of time in Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• some of the students were new arrivals, most having been in Australia for less than 12 months; others were long-term residents who had lived and worked in Australia for many years</li></ul>
Educational background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the students were all professionals with 14–17 years of education and degrees from their countries of origin</li></ul>
Nationalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• they came from 14 different countries and spoke 15 different languages</li></ul>
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• all full/part-time employed</li><li>• two self-employed</li></ul>

#### The research

I informed the class about the research, explaining that the findings of the research would help teachers improve their teaching strategies. The students expressed their willingness to participate and remarked that they appreciated the opportunity to express their points of view, as well as to listen to their classmates' opinions on the subject. They thought it would help them to focus more on vocabulary learning.

Data was collected in Week 1 and again in Week 8 of the same term. In the intervening weeks, new vocabulary was presented to the students using seven different methods. It was presented through:

- 1 pictures
- 2 definitions

- 3 word groups
  - a) synonyms, eg *ecstatic* — *cheerful, glad, joyous, elated*
  - b) antonyms, eg *ecstatic* — *depressed, sad, unhappy*
  - c) collocates, eg *exam* — *pass, fail, sit*
  - d) hyponyms, eg *family* — *mother, father, sister, brother*
- 4 minimal context (phrase or sentence) for the word
- 5 maximum context (where one has to read the whole paragraph for context)
- 6 focusing attention on the structure of the new word, looking at prefixes and suffixes, eg *dis* = *not* > *disagree, disregard, disadvantage*
- 7 combinations of the above.

The students were asked what they thought were the most efficient ways of presenting new vocabulary in class.

## Results of the research

Outcomes of the initial survey at the beginning of the ten-week course indicated that:

- 75 per cent of students preferred teachers to introduce new vocabulary through pictures (where possible) and definitions or synonyms
- 14 per cent of students were strongly in favour of contextual ways of presenting new vocabulary
- 11 per cent of students thought they would benefit most from a combination of all the vocabulary presentation methods.

Outcomes of the survey conducted in Week 8, after the students had been exposed to all of the seven methods for presenting new vocabulary, were as follows:

- 57 per cent of students considered contextual presentation of new vocabulary to be the most efficient
- 36 per cent of students preferred a combination of all the presentation methods
- 7 per cent of students said they would like teachers to introduce new vocabulary through definitions.

All of the students said that they liked new vocabulary to be presented in a story, especially when the story was relevant to their experience and background (eg stories about migrants in Australia and other countries). This relevance helped them understand and retain new vocabulary better.

The students were surprised at how their perceptions and opinions of different ways of presenting new vocabulary had changed after they became more aware of the issues. They said that they were now more in control of their vocabulary learning and felt that they had become much more confident in language learning in general.

## Conclusion

My involvement in this research has made me more aware of student perceptions of my teaching strategies and has shown, once again, that adult learners, especially those with higher levels of English, prefer to be aware of teaching strategies. This *conscious* approach improves their confidence in language learning and their learning potential.

The research project also gave me a valuable opportunity to discuss vocabulary teaching issues with my colleagues, which helped me to evaluate my own teaching. On the whole, participating in the research was very rewarding.

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## 4 *The love of my life: a thematic approach to teaching vocabulary*

Judy O’Keeffe

### Background

In recent years, I have attended a number of conferences and NCELTR forums at which teachers who have participated in action research projects have presented reports. Their enthusiasm for this type of research was infectious, so when the opportunity arose for me to become involved in an action research project to examine vocabulary acquisition, I was keen to participate.

I felt that a thematic approach to teaching vocabulary would provide my class of CSWE II students with a diverse, yet useful, collection of words and idioms for both formal and informal communication. As an advocate of journal writing, I also wanted to use student journals to help me assess transfer of learning across macro skills areas and across a range of situations. Journals provide an informal source of discourse, and I encourage students to keep them for a number of reasons, including the opportunity for me to observe the written flow-on effect from the classroom.

Only by moving outside what might be termed *traditional* settlement themes, such as *Personal Identification*, was it possible to find topics that were imaginative, challenging and stimulating, and that I could develop creatively to address both CSWE competencies and settlement issues. Universal themes, such as *Love*, extended the language of the group members and generated more enthusiastic group participation. The flexibility of the CSWE framework and the degree of autonomy we enjoy as classroom teachers within the AMEP enabled me to use a diversity of themes. I found this flexibility and autonomy invaluable as a classroom teacher involved in a project of this nature.

During the course of the project I had a perfect timetable. I taught the same class three days a week: Wednesday to Friday. I was able to introduce a new theme each Wednesday and develop that theme in as many ways as possible during the remainder of the week. For all of Term 3 and part of Term 4, I maintained a routine that allowed me to integrate the action research with the other demands of a busy settlement program. Because of the Olympic Games, Term 3 was unfortunately a short one. This meant that the weeks of observation were fewer than I would have liked.

### The students

The target group for this research was a small class of newly arrived migrants and refugees who were enrolled in a CSWE II level class. The class profile is outlined in the following table.

Language level	• 1 (entry) to 1+ (exit) (ASLPR)
Attendance	• all attended class regularly, although throughout the term the profile of the group changed slightly as people moved in and out of the program
Age	• 21 to 52
Gender	• ten females and one male
Educational background	• all were highly educated • all had post-secondary education in L1 and some were university graduates • two of the younger women had not completed their study at university because they had married and had come to Australia with their husbands
Work experience	• all but three of the group had been in the workforce at some stage before migrating
Language background	• Macedonian, Chinese, Tamil, Lao, Serbian, Hindi, Sinhalese, Russian, Spanish, Croatian

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the group was that two-thirds of the females were married to Australian-born or English speakers. This meant that the majority of the learners lived in an environment where the potential for reinforcement of the new vocabulary, through spoken dialogue, was extremely positive. Although I did not specifically research the active involvement of spouses in the project, I was aware of their input.

Home, for these students, was a positive contributing factor to their learning as it provided an active environment for enriched spoken dialogue where new vocabulary could be practised. One spouse was a linguistics fellow at the Australian National University, while another had published volumes of literary works. Often, the students recounted conversations they had with their spouses about the vocabulary theme for the week. In one case, where the student's husband always helped her with her homework, journal entries frequently reflected his input.

## The process

**Themes:** My approach to the issue of teaching new vocabulary was to heighten student awareness of new words by using them in context, as part of a theme presented in as many modes and formats as possible. Each week, the new theme became a part of an integrated program involving all macro skills. This 'total immersion' approach to a theme meant that it became the basis for group and pair work, oral discussion, role-play, reading (for both pleasure and for specific information), listening, cross-cultural awareness and for teaching discrete grammar points.

**Journals:** So that I might explore the transfer of learning to writing, I encouraged the use of journals in which students recorded their own responses to the various themes. In their journals, they wrote reports on the excursions we took outside the classroom and they recounted stories and personal experiences. Sometimes they contributed additional information they had individually researched about the

theme in the Individual Study Centre or on the Internet. This individual avenue for writing satisfied my enthusiasm for using journals as a teaching tool.

**Volunteers:** Volunteer tutors visited the classroom for an hour every week and were encouraged to follow up on the theme of the week, while practising conversation.

**Notepads:** The students were asked to carry sight/site vocabulary notepads with them so they could record any new words that might be appropriate for inclusion in the theme. A sight/site vocabulary notepad is something I always encourage students in my classes to carry. The tiny spiral-bound notepads are cheap and slip comfortably into a handbag or pocket. They can be used in buses, shops etc to record new words that the students either hear or read when they are travelling to and from class. Surprisingly, students seem to enjoy this active method of collecting new words. However, sometimes the approximation of the spelling of some words provides a challenge to the teacher and certainly to other members of the class. Feedback from other teachers confirmed that the students were using these notepads in both the computer laboratory and the Individual Learning Centre.

## Methodology

### Step 1: Setting the theme

On the first day of a new theme, I would introduce the topic by starting the session with a timed competition. When the stopwatch appeared, the students knew I would put the week's theme on the board and this became the signal for action. From that moment, they knew they had two minutes only in which to record all the words they could associate with the theme — lateral thinking was encouraged.

At the end of two minutes, they shared their lists through pair or group discussion and then they all went out to the board and wrote their selection of words on the board. They did this together, so there were occasions when there were 11 people standing at the board at the same time. Incorrect spelling was not an issue, as this was something we could easily fix later. Students were encouraged to refer to some words as *sounds like* words.

During the timed activity, I wrote my list too, deliberately writing the new vocabulary I wanted to introduce. This was vocabulary that I knew was going to appear in the videos, stories and other materials I would use over the next couple of days. The students wrote the words in their workbooks and most of them recorded translations in their own languages. It was during one of these sessions that a student decided she needed a bigger dictionary because her dictionary did not seem to give the same meanings as we were discovering. From then on, she arrived each day carrying a huge tome that would have challenged a champion weightlifter.

The aim of the timed game approach was to encourage risk taking, sharing of ideas and team building. Discussion about the word lists on the board meant that new vocabulary was put into context, and all of the students had a common starting point from which to launch into the unknown.

## Step 2: Total immersion

In this structured teaching stage, I presented the theme in as many ways as I could. I used videos, short stories and recounts, poetry, role-play, newspaper articles, quizzes, word puzzles and snatches from television and radio — anything that I could find or create that supported the theme and enriched and involved the vocabulary specific to that theme. By the end of the week, I felt that the students were often coping with material that could be described as far beyond the level of a CSWE II student. They were comfortable with materials that might well have been used with CSWE III students and beyond.

One week, the theme was *Visiting the Dentist*, so the students practised new vocabulary by role-playing:

- making an appointment
- telling the dentist about their problem
- paying their account.

They read about teeth and healthy gums in a health journal and they agonised over defining the feelings they had when they visited the dentist. At the end of the week, several of the students borrowed health fact sheets and took them home to read. Comments in their journals clearly indicated a high level of understanding and enjoyment of these quite sophisticated texts.

Colleagues involved in the vocabulary action research project were also on the lookout for items to supplement the theme, and I appreciated things such as the newspaper cuttings that mysteriously appeared on my desk and the lesson in creating crossword and find-a-word puzzles using the Internet. For others who might be interested, the web address is [www.puzzlemaker.com/code/BuildCrissCross.asp](http://www.puzzlemaker.com/code/BuildCrissCross.asp)

The students also found magazine articles and other items of interest. Occasionally, students' husbands contributed ideas and provided input. This was particularly the case when the theme for the week was *Amazing Facts*. What helped also that week was the coincidental screening by a local TV channel of some of the tales from the *Guinness Book of Records*. The book itself proved to be an invaluable source of facts and unbelievable stories.

The volunteer tutors also contributed. One day, a small group of students spent their time with their tutor reading poetry based on the week's theme: *Love*. This was a particularly wonderful theme, and one student brought in a volume of her husband's published works to share with the class. It included some beautiful dissertations on the theme. The class seemed to both enjoy and understand some of these works, which I would not normally have considered including in a lesson plan. This is why I stress the fact that these students appeared to be comfortable with content beyond their certificate level when the vocabulary for the week supported a theme.

On another occasion, the gregarious male member of the group engaged a Scottish gentleman at the bus interchange in conversation about natural disasters — specifically about the volcanic eruption of Mount Toyama, which had been reported on the television news the previous evening. The theme for the week was *Natural Disasters, Volcanoes and Other Natural Phenomena*. Fortunately, my father was a Scot, so the *sounds like* list of words the student presented after this conversation in his sight/site book was not totally beyond my ken, though the phonetic approximations did stretch the imagination a little.

As a follow-up to the theme of *Money*, we visited the Royal Australian Mint, and the students successfully used this visit as the basis of their report writing competency assessment task.

### Step 3: Journal entries

Journal entries were written at home and included personal recounts of experiences and responses, and occasionally reports of information the students had researched themselves. Journal entries were not shared with others, although at times they provided some students with source material for oral discussion. I was surprised at the eagerness of the students to hand in their journals each week and attributed this partly to the fact that the journals were not for a general audience. There was only one person who did not want to maintain a regular journal, and this student remained a reluctant writer. However, it was also this student who produced probably the most moving comments in a journal entry on the theme of *Love* when writing about *the love of my life*.

### Step 4: Post-theme stopwatch

At the end of the week, to give a sense of completion to the unit, the stopwatch was produced and for two minutes the students wrote down all the words they associated with the weekly theme. Group discussion followed as students eagerly tallied their lists and compared them with their pre-theme lists.

What surprised me was that this crude data collection, with no scientific or statistical substance, satisfied that nagging part of my brain that wanted a quantitative indicator that learning had taken place. Just the same, there was a great deal of evidence in the student journals to indicate that they had broadened their word usage and were able to put into context words they had previously not been familiar with.

An observation I made at this stage was that, although the lists were considerably longer and certainly more diverse, spelling had not greatly improved. Perhaps the pressure of the timing aspect of the game played a role here and the urgency to get the word on paper outweighed concern for accuracy in spelling.

One day the comment was made:

*You think you don't know these words, but I said to my children this morning, 'You must clean your teeth, you do not want halitosis!'*

*Halitosis* was a word the student had read in a health fact sheet and had obviously been impressed by since he also knew its simple and more commonly used synonym.

The stopwatch became an important teaching aid and served many purposes. It took on a surprising role of its own and became an immediate trigger to all sorts of positive responses. One student liked to refer to this as her *waking up time*. The stopwatch:

- introduced an element of fun and challenge
- provided a framework of time for both brainstorming sessions detailed in Step 1 (Wednesdays) and Step 4 (Fridays)
- gave a starting point and a conclusion to the theme
- defined a period of time for a crude empirical measure of student performance.

### Data collection

During the teaching sequence for each theme, I used the data collection methods outlined in the following table.

Method	Period of time	Purpose of this method
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summaries of my observations of student reactions, comments, feelings</li> <li>• Student quotes and anecdotes</li> </ul>	<p>Ongoing and ad hoc in nature so that my observations did not interfere with the flow of lessons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to compare my expectations with student performance</li> <li>• to keep records of things that happened on a day-to-day basis</li> <li>• to monitor my own teaching methodology with a view to maintaining successful teaching practices and implementing changes to maximise student learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal feedback from others, including volunteer tutors and teachers in the computing laboratory and the Individual Learning Centre about student practices and performance</li> </ul>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to see if there was a noticeable transfer of learning and/or heightened awareness of issues surrounding the learning of vocabulary outside classroom – feedback from all areas indicated strongly that this particular cohort of students religiously used their tiny sight/site notepads</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student journal entries – shared only with the teacher. These individual written discourses were often:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– very personal and emotional accounts of student responses to various themes</li> <li>– funny, sensitive and of a linguistic quality beyond their designated CSWE level.</li> </ul>                             Students were prepared to take risks and were keen to use their new vocabulary                         </li> </ul>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to encourage students to use new vocabulary in their written recounts and reports based on their own individual research</li> <li>• to provide a medium through which students could express opinions and outline their interests using appropriate vocabulary</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>	<p>One-off at the end of Week 6</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to determine what strategies the students were using to help them learn their new vocabulary – all students indicated they were generally employing all of the strategies outlined on the survey sheet</li> </ul>

## Themes

Themes had to be interesting and universal. They also had to:

- provide extension to all macro skills
- meet student needs for essential and functional grammar and syntax
- integrate satisfactorily with both settlement issues and CSWE competencies
- address other aspects of the course, such as cross-cultural awareness
- provide opportunities to expand student study and research skills
- produce useful, practical language
- sustain student interest and stimulate their imaginations.

Themes included:

- Natural Disasters — Volcanoes and Other Natural Phenomena
- Strange and Amazing Facts
- Love
- Animals
- Favourite Food and Recipes to Share
- Interesting People
- Special Celebrations
- Money
- Visiting the Dentist.

## Data findings

The following extracts come from a selection of my own personal records of observations, around the theme presented in class.

Theme: Strange and Amazing Facts

<p><b>Comments</b> Reasons for choice as a theme:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• universal appeal</li> <li>• ready sources of amazing facts (material at a suitable level)</li> <li>• coincidentally, the students have told me there is a program currently on commercial TV showing amazing facts – based on the <i>Guinness Book of Records</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Personal observations of student responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• general eagerness to read the amazing fact pages, to work in pairs to summarise details and to report findings to the class as a whole</li> <li>• responses ranged from horror to incredulity – these, combined with an absolute fascination for the bizarre, resulted in everyone reading articles well beyond ASLPR 1/1+ and CSWE II material</li> <li>• long, enthusiastic journal entries about outrageous and bizarre events</li> <li>• use of comparisons and superlatives in context was accurate</li> <li>• confident oral responses punctuated by expressions of incredulity and amazement including: <i>Incredible!</i>, <i>Unbelievable!</i>, <i>Can you believe it?</i>, <i>Amazing!</i> and <i>Fantastic!</i> NB: Students have continued to use these well beyond the week of the theme and they appear to have become a natural part of their</li> </ul>
<p><b>References</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Guinness Book of Records</i></li> <li>• <i>True Stories</i> (Sandra Heyer): Longman</li> <li>• <i>More True Stories</i> (Sandra Heyer)</li> <li>• <i>Even More True Stories</i> (Sandra Heyer), eg <i>The World's Largest Family</i></li> <li>• <i>Newspapers</i> (Nick Marsden): OUP</li> <li>• <i>Between the Lines</i> (Early Intermediate) by Mark Ellis and Printha Ellis: Nelson</li> </ul>	

Continued next page

	<p>dialogue. I still hear them used as fillers in conversations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• surprising discussion about the birth of 10.8 kg baby – derivation of the term <i>caesarian birth</i></li> <li>• cross-cultural awareness – including issues about birth control and attitudes towards institutionalised care</li> </ul>
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**Theme: Love**

<p><b>Comments</b> Reasons for choice as a theme:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• universal appeal – crosses all cultural barriers, all generations etc</li> <li>• availability of neutral material</li> </ul>	<p><b>Personal observations of student responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• eagerness on the part of the group to share thoughts on the subject</li> <li>• beauty of the vocabulary and sentiments expressed in oral stages of discussion</li> <li>• depth of interpretation of the concept of love – interesting, varied and sensitive</li> <li>• references made to the classics, poetry, ballet, music, family, romance and <i>the love of my life</i></li> <li>• the feel-good flow-on effect on both individuals and the group as a whole</li> <li>• the outstanding journal entries (occasionally quite personal and always beautiful – about children, parents and partners)</li> <li>• written anecdotes (recounts) on this theme suggested the students were using semantics, syntax and grammar beyond the standard I would normally expect from a CSWE II level learner at this stage in the program</li> </ul>
<p><b>References</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>True Stories and More True Stories</i>, eg <i>Puppy Love</i></li> <li>• <i>Newspapers</i> by Nick Marsden: OUP (copyright free)</li> <li>• Newspaper articles from the Tasmanian English Language Centre publication, <i>English in the News</i></li> </ul>	

**Theme: Visiting the Dentist**

<p><b>Comments</b> Reasons for choice as a theme:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• universal experience</li> <li>• provides practice in making appointments, negotiating, obtaining and giving detailed information – settlement issues</li> <li>• an opportunity for role-play</li> </ul>	<p><b>Personal observations of student responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• practical outcomes – role-play making appointments with the dentist was extended to doctors, restaurants and even a hairdresser</li> <li>• more enthusiasm for discussion and sharing dental stories than for journal entries this week!</li> </ul>
<p><b>References</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Snapshots</li> <li>• Work Environment Department, Canberra Institute of Technology <i>Health Advancement Program</i> publications</li> </ul>	



## Reflections

Learning that is rewarding and supported by varied and frequent opportunities for practice is more likely to be retained. By using a thematic approach to teaching new vocabulary, I was able to provide opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to express a wealth of opinions. Students used new vocabulary related to a range of universal themes in oral contexts. They actively listened to and applied positive learning strategies to thematic words on audiocassettes and videos, and they read, with awareness, words from a range of written texts based on each theme. The quality of their individual research reports and the entries in their journals, including recounts and narratives, convinced me that a thematic approach to teaching vocabulary increases student confidence and ability to use newly acquired words, and to use these words in a range of situations.

The collaborative approach to the project provided regular contact with peers and opportunities to share ideas and experiences. This aspect of the project cannot be undervalued. The project provided me with an opportunity to examine my teaching practices and to revisit some of the practices I used in the past whose value I had forgotten.

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## **5 Using personal stories to teach the language of settlement**

**Lyn Govendir**

### **Background**

I was interested in the NCELTR vocabulary project as I had already been experimenting with reading as a means of promoting the acquisition of lexis and grammar. I welcomed the prospect of discussing and focusing my ideas within the support and confines of the project.

The class I was teaching at the time of the project was a CSWE II Phase 2 class at the Institute of Languages, University of New South Wales. Because of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, normal term lengths were altered and this meant I was only able to conduct the action research over one of the shorter terms of five and a half weeks.

Fortunately, the class was extremely motivated, cooperative and conscientious. The 19 students came from varied backgrounds: the Middle East, Sudan, Japan, China, Indonesia, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Russia, the Philippines and Bangladesh. I discussed the project with the students, who expressed interest in participating and a desire to increase their vocabulary.

### **The project**

When I started the project, I had the following questions in mind:

- Are reading and listening more effective in lexis acquisition than reading alone?
- How can new lexis be recycled within the existing course framework?
- How can successful acquisition be assessed?
- How accurate am I in predicting useful unknown and passively known lexis?
- Are materials transferable to independent home learning after an initial presentation period in the classroom?

I was aware that there were a lot of questions to be answered in a short time and I decided to address them all, while concentrating on the first two.

It was necessary to begin the action research as soon as the shorter term began, and thus individual student needs could not be assessed for incorporation into the project design. I informed students of my interest and involvement, knowing vocabulary acquisition to be a universal student concern.

I initiated discussion by presenting the following class survey.

Reading and listening survey	
1	Do you like reading in your own language? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
2	If you answered YES, do you like reading <input type="checkbox"/> newspapers? <input type="checkbox"/> magazines? <input type="checkbox"/> professional journals? <input type="checkbox"/> storybooks
3	Do you read in English? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> A LITTLE
4	If you answered YES, what do you like reading? <input type="checkbox"/> newspapers <input type="checkbox"/> magazines <input type="checkbox"/> professional journals <input type="checkbox"/> storybooks
5	Do you listen to and/or speak English outside the classroom? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/> A LITTLE
6	If you answered YES, do you: <input type="checkbox"/> speak to native speakers? <input type="checkbox"/> speak to other migrants? <input type="checkbox"/> speak in social situations? <input type="checkbox"/> speak mainly in shops? <input type="checkbox"/> listen to TV? <input type="checkbox"/> listen to the radio?
7	How do you prefer to learn English? <input type="checkbox"/> through reading <input type="checkbox"/> through listening <input type="checkbox"/> through reading and listening

Before conducting the survey, I introduced a discussion on the use of the five senses as channels of learning and the concept of bi-sensory or multi-sensory input of information to the brain centres of comprehension, memory storage and retrieval.

The aim of the survey was to determine:

- whether the students enjoyed reading and/or listening activities in first language
- whether the students consciously saw reading and/or listening activities as an effective means of language acquisition
- whether the students enjoyed reading and/or listening activities in English.

I also wanted to focus student awareness on their individual sensory learning patterns and the possibility of strengthening these through a bi-sensory approach.

The most difficult and critical aspect of the process was the selection of a text to be used in the classroom. I wanted to use a reader, but graded readers mostly fall into three groups:

- 1 rewrites of well-known thrillers
- 2 thrillers written specifically for ESL students
- 3 short factual accounts of a scientific or criminal nature.



### 'We came to Australia' Survey

*Tick as many answers as you like*

#### **A Vocabulary exercises**

- 1 Did you find the word meaning group exercises were:  
 useful?  
 interesting?  
 neither?
- 2 Did you find the word form exercises (noun, verb etc) were:  
 useful?  
 interesting?  
 neither?
- 3 Did you find the 'match-the-pairs' exercises were:  
 useful?  
 interesting?  
 neither?

#### **B Text presentation**

- 1 Were the stories easier to understand:  
 by reading only?  
 by writing only?  
 by reading and writing together?
- 2 Compared to stories that you have read in English by yourself, were these stories:  
 longer?  
 shorter?  
 the same length?
- 3 Compared to stories that you have read in English by yourself, were these stories:  
 easier to understand?  
 more difficult to understand?  
 about the same?
- 4 Did you find the stories:  
 interesting?  
 relevant?  
 neither?  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **C Comprehension questions**

- 1 Did you find the questions about personal information (age etc):  
 interesting?  
 useful?  
 neither?

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Students found the questions about biodata to be quick and useful. The story structure questions were seen as difficult at first, but subsequently they became easier as the students discerned the common pattern of the stories, which were written from six common questions. The activities related to story structure were seen as slow and tedious, especially for the slower readers, but the comprehension questions were seen as interesting and useful. Students found the computer lab activities challenging but useful, the dictagloss useful and the Friday test was by far the favourite activity.

The students responded well to the materials. From the first story, a kind of magic settled over the class as they heard and identified with the lives of other migrants. It was as if they had found their place in the line of migration that is the history of Australia over the past two centuries. The fact that these stories went further than their own gave them something on which to project their hopes and fears for the unknown future.

## Conclusions

In relation to my original questions, I made the following observations.

- **Are reading and listening more effective in lexis acquisition than reading alone?**  
This proved to be true for the majority of students, who felt that their overall comprehension of the text had been enhanced. The text came alive for them as they were able to move through it faster. They were able to combine the greater speed of the listening mode with the added comprehension of the reading mode. The students analysed the written text further when they completed the questions, and this gave them further exposure to the texts and an opportunity to fill in the gaps in their understanding.
- **How can new lexis be recycled within the existing course framework?**  
Having a strong story and a focus on lexis, structures and functions for each week provided meatier content with which to construct the storyboard and dictagloss, making lesson preparation quick and painless. It was a relatively easy task to adapt the new texts and storylines to the existing timetable. In fact, it provided an opportunity to link the structure and function of the week more thematically. This made lessons more cohesive than lessons that are adapted from different sources.

The material could have been developed in an almost limitless way. CSWE competencies relating specifically to listening, reading and speaking could be incorporated into this lesson structure. There is also an obvious lead-in to writing, and the CSWE II written competencies could be covered as the following table outlines.

Recount	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We came to Australia</i> stories were written from the responses to six questions</li> <li>• students could answer one of these questions each week and their answers could build to a recount of their own</li> <li>• student recounts could be printed as a class set for each student to keep</li> </ul>
Formatted text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students could orally develop a questionnaire to survey the class on matters relating to their migration experience, which could then be developed into a formatted form with the help of the teacher and completed by students</li> </ul>
Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• data from the formatted text survey could form the basis of a report</li> </ul>



# SECTION THREE

## *Teaching techniques*

### **1 *Learning new vocabulary from TV***

Anna Kingston

### **2 *Watching to learn or learning to watch***

Ari Van Eysden

### **3 *Using dictations in the classroom***

Maria Wylie

### **4 *Memorising morphemes with music***

Merran Martin

### **5 *Song stuck in my head***

Sandra Wood

### **6 *Meaty chunks***

Theresa Kozar

## Introduction

Any consideration of teaching vocabulary must take into account teaching techniques. In the classroom, teachers need to develop activities and tasks that introduce new vocabulary and enable students to work with it. The recycling of new words and phrases through various phases of a lesson or unit is essential for reinforcing new vocabulary. The teachers in this section chose to focus on teaching techniques for introducing and teaching vocabulary.

Through discussion and a survey of her CSWE III students in Tasmania, Anna Kingston identified a number of issues related to vocabulary learning. Television was identified as a good source of new words, with the students watching television for an average of 2.5 hours per day. Anna decided to develop a range of activities within a unit of work focusing on developing vocabulary through television.

Ari Van Eysden teaches in two small centres on the north-west coast of Tasmania. Her two classes were mixed level, ranging from CSWE I to CSWE III. Ari also decided to focus on television as a source of vocabulary learning because her students only attended class once a week. She selected two programs — a drama and the news — and set the students tasks to undertake when watching these programs.

Maria Wylie chose to use different approaches to dictation as a means of increasing vocabulary with her fast-paced CSWE II class in NSW AMES. For example, each day an unseen dictation was given based on new words that students had recorded in their notebooks. The students self-corrected these dictations and Maria also corrected them.

Merran Martin was working with a CSWE I class at the time of the project, in the ACT. She was interested in the part that memory plays in vocabulary learning. Using some aspects of the Suggestopedia methodology, Merran presented vocabulary based on a theme within a lesson. At the end of the lesson, she used relaxation techniques and music while she repeated words from the lesson. She then surveyed students about their responses to vocabulary development within the lessons.

Sandra Wood integrated songs into her program with a CSWE II class in Canberra. She chose songs with everyday vocabulary that she felt would be useful to her students. She focused on the songs through a sequence of pre-study, while-studying and post-study activities. At the end of the term, she gave the students a vocabulary test incorporating words from the songs studied in class.

Theresa Kozar was teaching a CSWE I class at the St Albans Centre in Victoria at the time of the project. She became involved because she was interested in why some words are retained by students and others are not. She decided to focus on chunks of language introduced through easy stories. She recycled the vocabulary through various activities including excursions, computer programs, rote learning and videos. By focusing on the phrasing of chunks of language, the students were made aware of how meaning comes through the combination of words and that groups of words have particular rhythm.

# 1 Learning new vocabulary from TV

Anna Kingston

## Background

Towards the end of Term 2, 2000, I started to investigate issues of vocabulary learning with my CSWE III class. The students were a group of motivated and educated people, all with a positive attitude to language learning. As they were all approaching the end of their entitlement to English classes, one of my major concerns was to help them develop strategies for independent language learning. With the focus on vocabulary, we held a series of class discussions and the students were encouraged to write in their journals. The term *vocabulary* was defined as 'the total number of lexical items the students knew and could use'. In the course of discussions with this group of students, and a later survey of 24 students from three CSWE classes, five main issues about vocabulary learning emerged.

- 1 The first issue was that all the students wanted to increase their general English vocabulary. In the written survey:
  - fifteen students indicated that they needed to increase their vocabulary *a lot*
  - eight students indicated that they needed to increase their vocabulary *a little*
  - only one student felt his vocabulary was *adequate for his needs*.
- 2 The second issue to emerge was where the students encountered new words to add to their vocabulary. In discussion, the students agreed that, outside the language classroom, they did the majority of their active vocabulary learning through reading. This was confirmed in the survey where 16 students rated reading as one of the three most important sources of vocabulary learning. Two other important sources were the language classroom and conversations with native speakers. The finding about reading came as no surprise. As Nation (1995:7) comments: 'reading has long been seen as a major source of vocabulary growth'.
- 3 Another issue was the amount of reading that students actually did outside the language classroom. The students felt that they had little time or energy to devote to reading. Most of them had pressing family commitments and settlement concerns that took up most of their time, and their formal learning arrangement was only 14 hours per week. Many of them also found reading in English difficult, and this set up a vicious cycle. As Nation (1995:8) points out: 'one of the major barriers to reading in the second language is vocabulary size'. Until learners could gain control of the skill of reading (which for native speakers takes several years), there could be little vocabulary growth from this source.
- 4 Through discussion, we discovered that the single greatest input of English language, apart from the language classroom and conversation with native speakers, was television. We conducted a survey and discovered that the students spent an average of 2.5 hours per day watching television. Students varied widely in the number of new words they felt they learned each week from television, but it worked out to be an average of five to ten words. However, all students agreed that it was not easy to find out the meaning of words that they heard for the first time on television. As one student commented in her journal: *When I try to catch*

*the meaning of words in radio/TV, I will miss the other things.* Several of the students spoke of the frustration of their native-speaker spouses or housemates at continually being interrupted to explain words heard on TV. One student came up with the solution of noting down words and then asking her husband at the end of the program. The students all agreed that this was a good strategy, and that those without native-speaking spouses could ask friends or teachers later, or could look up the words in a dictionary.

5 The next issue to arise was how to represent the sound of a new word accurately, so that the learner could say it. The students also needed to be able to transcribe the word correctly so that it could be found in the dictionary. These two skills clearly needed to be developed and the following strategies were suggested:

- Listen to a TV program for a short time with the sole aim of catching new words (not of achieving global comprehension).
- Write down the new words using phonemic script.
- Attempt to spell the words from the phonemic script.
- When necessary, seek help from native speakers to spell the words.
- Look up the words in an English dictionary.
- Make a record of the words and try to use them in a meaningful context.

Armed with all this information from the students, and with their enthusiastic approval, I set about designing and teaching a unit of work, in three stages, which would enable them to learn new vocabulary through TV.

## The teaching unit

Level: The unit was designed for CSWE III Vocational and Further Study syllabus strands.

Aim: To enable students to develop strategies for independently learning new vocabulary from TV.

### Stage 1

Objective: 

- To enable students to articulate (verbally and in writing) their vocabulary learning difficulties and strategies.

Method: 

- Students surveyed each other in groups to discover:
  - how many new words they learnt from TV per week
  - how they found and remembered the meanings of new words.
- Students shared and discussed the difficulties they had with trying to learn new words from TV and the strategies they used.
- Groups reported their findings to the rest of the class.

NB: This survey can be repeated at the end of the unit or course in order to evaluate progress.

### Stage 2

Objectives: To enable students to: 

- develop confidence in getting words from audiovisual media
- identify five new words from five minutes of listening
- find meanings of new words in a dictionary and record them in notebooks.

- Materials:
- Video selected by the teacher on the basis of interest to students and content of challenging new vocabulary.
  - Phonemic charts for each student.
  - English learner dictionaries.
- Method:
- Students watched about five minutes of the video.
  - Students attempted to write down new words.
  - Teacher supported students by calling out new words as they occurred.
  - In groups, students helped each other to write new words using phonemic script.
  - Teacher wrote five new words from the video on the board using phonemic script.
  - Volunteers came out to the board to spell the words.
  - Spelling rules discussed.
  - In groups or pairs, students used English learner dictionaries to find the meanings of the words.
  - Students recorded the new words and their meanings in their notebooks.
- NB: Stage 2 may be repeated a number of times using a range of suitable videos until the students become more competent at representing the sounds of words accurately.

### Stage 3

- Objectives:
- To enable students to record at least five new words from a TV program watched at home.
- Materials:
- TV program.
  - Phonemic charts for each student.
  - English learner dictionaries.
- Method:
- Students collectively choose a half-hour program to watch at home, eg News.
  - During first five minutes of program students write down sounds of new words.
  - In class next day, teacher elicits new words and writes them on the board in phonemic script.
  - Phonemically scripted words on the board are transcribed by volunteer students.
  - In groups or pairs, the students look up the meanings of words in dictionaries and record them in notebooks.
- NB: This stage can be repeated ad infinitum. It could become a weekly or fortnightly class routine.

This unit was taught over a period of approximately eight weeks in Term 3. But, as so often happens in the AMEP, conditions changed dramatically. A steady stream of new arrivals, all with CSWE III-level English, swelled the numbers so that by the end of the term there were 22 in the class. Not only that, but by the end of the term, only two of the original nine students who had participated in my original survey and needs analysis remained in the class. For this reason, it is impossible for me to make any definite conclusions about the success of the planned intervention. Nevertheless, I think it is useful to make some subjective observations about the unit and student progress, with the help of extracts from student journals.

## Observations

The students articulated (verbally and in writing) their difficulties and strategies in learning vocabulary. The students said that they learned, on average, five to ten new words from television each week. They talked about a number of methods for remembering the new words, including using them in speech and writing, writing them in personal vocabulary records and through repetition and self-testing.

**Observation:** It seems that retention is affected by how useful the word is, and how much opportunity the learner finds to use it.

The students made excellent use of the opportunity to discuss and share vocabulary learning strategies. Entries in their journals demonstrated that they had a very good awareness of what was involved in vocabulary learning, as can be seen from these comments by students:

- *It is difficult for me to differentiate some of adverbs and adjectives, as well as articles uses.* (Sudanese male, mid-thirties)
- *I understand from reading more than listening news or some friends talking. In my opinion what I have to do to fix this problem is to find some Australian friend or home tutor to solve this kind of difficulty.* (Ethiopian male, late twenties)
- *I know many words, but sometimes I forget them. My problem is I speak very fast and when I have not time to think I forget the new words.* (Middle-aged Chilean woman)
- *Each week I learn at least three words and I learn them by finding their meanings then I get examples. Then I try to make sentences out of them and sometimes I use them when talking to people.* (Young Sudanese male)
- *There are many new words every day and I don't know how to learn them because first I start to write them down but I can't get [use] the dictionary to get the meaning.* (Sudanese woman, late twenties)
- *Sometime I know something and I usually must check. Especially verbs give me trouble nearly every time. Even when I know it I must check.* (Serbian woman, early thirties)
- *Now every week I learn about 20–30 words but I can't remember all of them. I choose some of them which I will use. Most new words I learn in class and some from the newspaper. Then I keep all new words in my notebook and sometimes I will try to use them.* (Young international student from Hong Kong)
- *I can learn new words from conversation with Australian friends but I cannot remember after while because I have difficulties of spelling, but orally I can know the meaning through friends.* (Middle-aged Sudanese male)
- *Television programs I think it's a really good way [to learn new words] because the pronunciation is very good and we can see different topics.* (Young Colombian international student)

Students developed confidence in getting words from audiovisual media. I used videos from the AMES Resource Centre collection. The first was an ABC documentary about Uluru. I chose it because it had sufficiently challenging vocabulary, and because the students were interested in learning about Australia. The second was *Behind the News* (BTN), about a school attendance monitoring system. This was chosen because it fitted in with a theme on education and because it had a high

content of fast colloquial speech from young Australian students. BTN was also helpful in that the program is fully transcribed.

Each time we watched a video, I used the strategy of loudly repeating words as they occurred in the video and encouraging the students to try to write them down. At the end of five minutes of listening, I elicited new vocabulary from the students and wrote words on the board in phonemic script. Then I invited volunteers to come to the board and try to spell the words, with help from their classmates. The students then worked in groups or individually to find the words in the learner dictionaries and record the meanings.

**Observation:** The students appreciated a lengthy quiet individual time of up to thirty minutes to record and get to know new words. The words that students singled out for active learning were the ones that they felt were useful to them.

Record-keeping strategies varied but I tried to encourage students to write at least one meaningful sentence using the word. The students found this both difficult and strenuous, and they needed a lot of time to do it well. I encouraged them by asking them to read out their sentences and writing some of them on the board.

**Observation:** The daily list of new words should be kept short — no more than five.

Students recorded at least five new words from a TV program watched at home. The first program chosen by the students was a commercial television 6.30 pm news program. I asked them to listen for new words only in the first five minutes and to try to get down at least five words. Next day, I followed the same process as in Stage 2, using the video program. I was able to elicit a large number of new words from the students and they were surprised and pleased with their ability to represent the sounds they heard accurately. While I encouraged students to use standard phonemic script, I did not labour it.

**Observation:** Some students have their own way of representing the sounds of words and find it too difficult to remember the correct phonemic symbols. I found, however, that the majority had no difficulty reading accurately the phonemic script that I used on the board.

The next program that the students agreed to watch at home was *Groundforce*, a landscaping program on commercial TV. This time we were jinxed! I did not see the program myself. Only five students watched it and there were not many new words — it was too easy.

**Observation:** It is useful sometimes to get learners to bring to class words from programs that the teacher has not seen, as the learner has to work hard to pronounce the words correctly so that the teacher can recognise them.

Other programs chosen included *Good Medicine* and an SBS documentary about an Aboriginal woman from Adelaide who journeyed to the Nullarbor to find her roots.

At the end of the term, with virtually a whole new group of people before me, I asked the students to reflect on their vocabulary learning, focusing on their learning from TV. I leave the last words to the students through extracts from their journals:

- *I can learn new vocabulary from TV. Usually they are words that I can hear more often, eg from the news. I write them down. Often, that's enough to remember them but sometimes I have to memorise them. It is difficult for me when I hear just a sound and I*



## **2 Watching to learn or learning to watch**

**Ari Van Eysden**

### **The setting**

My action research was carried out in two very small AMES centres, based on the north-west coast of Tasmania and run by me as a single teacher. Participating in this research project gave me an opportunity to work collaboratively with AMES staff in the other two much larger centres in Tasmania, an opportunity that I valued very much as it gave me the feeling of being part of a team.

The two classes were held once per week, giving students only four hours per week to attend formal English classes. Almost all of the students were also involved in the Distance Learning Program. In Tasmania, we have only three terms per year, and this project took place in the third and final term of the year, which was ten weeks long. There had been no specific focus on vocabulary all year.

The two groups were disparate in nature, the students ranging from beginner to post-intermediate level learners CSWE I to CSWE III. Their ages ranged from 19 to 45 years.

- Group A:
- six students
  - males and females
  - humanitarian and migrant entrants
  - majority came from one language background
  - different cultural, social and educational backgrounds
  - none of the students had any prior English language learning experience.

- Group B:
- four students
  - only spouses of Australian men
  - from different cultural backgrounds.

The decision to carry out the action research with students in both groups was based on the fact that they were only small groups and there existed a good bond between the students in each group. Both groups had been working together for most of the year and consequently knew each other and their teacher very well. Each class was quite different in terms of group dynamics. The students were informed about the project and from the beginning appeared keen to cooperate.

### **General aims of my research**

As these learners spent relatively little time in the actual classroom, and all of them possessed a television, I wanted to find out if teaching them strategies to learn new words from television was a feasible method of helping them on a path towards autonomy. I was also keen for them to be able to use strategies to develop vocabulary in a range of other contexts — for example, when listening to the radio or while eavesdropping on casual conversations around them.

I wanted to focus on the following issues in relation to vocabulary learning:

- television as a contextualised learning environment that provides imagery to facilitate comprehension
- comprehensive learning
- developing a systematic approach over an extended period of time.

## A change in focus

Originally, my objectives were to enable the students to:

- listen for specific sounds
- transcribe the sounds into words by using the phonemic alphabet
- spell the words
- look up the meanings of the words in their bilingual dictionaries
- keep a list of new words in the back of their books.

However, it soon became apparent that the introduction of the phonemic alphabet served only to confuse the majority of students. This was due to a lack of time to teach the phonemic alphabet to students who were totally unfamiliar with it and probably my own lack of experience in using it as a teaching tool.

Consequently, I decided to allow the students to use whatever strategy they wanted to pick up new words while watching television. I encouraged them to write down what they heard in any way that was familiar to them. Then I asked them to share with the rest of the group how they went about *deciphering* their words. I hoped that they would be able to adopt new strategies for themselves, if appropriate. What followed was an enlightening and engaging exercise in which every student was able to participate.

## Research method

I chose to do this research through teacher reflection. I set aside some time at the end of every teaching session to write down what had transpired in the class.

## Pre-research activity

At the end of the second term I asked all the students to watch TV during their two-week holiday break. I asked them to come back to class with some new words they had learned from TV. I did not explain why. As expected, on our first day back, only two people in Group A had completed the task.

I administered a questionnaire about vocabulary development and helped the students with the questions, where necessary. I discussed the results of the questionnaire with the groups and explained how this was connected to a research project. This led to an immediate rise in interest in vocabulary acquisition and the action research project. At this stage nothing was mentioned about strategies for listening, as I wanted them to explain how they would go about listening for new words without any influence from me.

My next step was to determine if there was one TV program that the whole group would like to watch. After some animated discussion in both groups, Group A decided on *Water Rats* and Group B chose the *6 O'clock News*. It was decided that the students would use only the first segment of *Water Rats* (up to the first set of advertisements) and the first item of the news to listen for new words. The students were asked to come to the next class with at least one word they had learned from their TV viewing. The results of this initial viewing are outlined in the following table.

Group A: <i>Water Rats</i>					
	Level	Sex	Age	Country	Strategy/Comments/New words
S1	2/3	M	19	Bosnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• didn't like it, therefore no new words</li> </ul>
S2	2	F	40	Bosnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• asked her daughter who had watched it with her for both the English word and its meaning</li> <li>• <i>collapse, oxygen</i></li> </ul>
S3	1	M	45	Bosnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• too difficult for him to write anything while watching but he nevertheless enjoyed program</li> </ul>
S4	1/2	F	23	Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• asked her husband whose English is excellent</li> <li>• <i>negotiate, violent, protest</i></li> </ul>
S5	1	M	23	Bosnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• good program but no new words because it was all too difficult</li> </ul>
S6	1	F	26	Bosnia	
Group B: <i>6 O'clock News</i>					
S7	1	F	36	Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• asked husband who had watched it with her</li> <li>• <i>festival</i></li> </ul>
S8	1/2	F	26	Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no words</li> <li>• she could not write them down because she could not spell them</li> </ul>
S9	3 High oracy, low literacy	F	32	Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• she had scribbled down something that sounded like word but had no idea what the words were</li> <li>• words were only deciphered after watching segments again in class</li> <li>• <i>pre-purchased tickets, regular</i></li> </ul>
S10	3 Strong in oral and written skills	F	34	Fiji	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• had written words down mostly spelled correctly</li> <li>• then checked the spelling and meaning in her dictionary</li> <li>• <i>interstate, contestants</i></li> </ul>

In Group A, we did not watch the program again in class. There seemed little point as all the words had been interpreted correctly, albeit with help from family members. The students were also not interested in watching it again.

In Group B, we did watch the news again and successfully deciphered the two words for Student 9. At this stage I introduced the phonemic alphabet to the group. I showed them a chart and where to find it in the dictionary. The purpose was to show Student 9 and the two weaker students how sounds could be translated into letters and then into words. Student 9 became confused and frustrated with this activity, but Student 8 became very interested and asked for more practice. Owing to lack of time, we were unable to continue with this activity during the class but we decided to watch another news item at home.

### The next step

It was obvious at this point that few students had independent strategies for learning new words from watching television. In Group A, it also became difficult to decide on

one program that everyone was prepared to watch. I decided that the students should learn one word from any program. They had to share the word and the strategy they used to learn it with the rest of the class. I stipulated that they were not to ask any other person for help.

I asked the students to keep a very brief journal. They had to:

- record the TV programs they watched
- record the channel, the time and the day
- write down at least one new word from each program.

At the beginning of each lesson, I asked one or two students to tell the rest of the class their results. The students were told in advance when their turn would be and I started with the more confident ones. I also had a quick look at the journals of the other students so that they would be encouraged to participate on a weekly basis.

It was made clear that the point of the exercise was for them to become independent learners. From then on, the research began to resemble a steam train. It started off slowly and sluggishly but gradually gathered momentum until all students felt they could participate successfully. I think it is best described by giving details about each individual learner.

#### Group A

##### Student 1

- Characteristics:
- son of S2.
- Strategies:
- decided that if his mother (S2) could learn new words so could he
  - biggest problem was having the patience to use a dictionary correctly, so almost a whole lesson followed on dictionary use
  - total of his new words always remained less than his mother's — I believe this is due to the fact that basically his learning style was very different
  - made it quite clear that he preferred to learn new words from mates as then he does not need to use a dictionary.

##### Student 2

- Characteristics:
- wife of S3
  - mother of S1
  - spoke same language as S5 & S6
  - student in this class for about one year
  - arrived with no English
  - from beginning displayed all the signs of a good learner.
- Strategies:
- set the pace in this group
  - soon convinced everyone in the class that it was possible to learn new words this way and that it could be done independently
  - concluded that it was preferable to work independently as you did not need to bother anyone else that way and could do it when it suited you
  - strategy was to listen carefully for a word, phonetically write down immediately what she heard, look at the context in which the word appeared in the program and broadly understand the context

- later tried to look up word in dictionary
- if couldn't find word, would look for another first letter that sounded the same
- discovered that usually, if she had the first three letters, she could guess rest of word by looking at all words in the dictionary starting with same letter and from reading all the meanings she was able to discover the word she wanted
- successfully did this with words such as *kolaps*, *diskastet*, *korapt*, *loja*, *wof*
- conceded not always possible but that did not matter because nobody is perfect and you cannot always be successful, eg had no success with *eksost* (*exhaust*) and *polodjast* (*apologised*) — I helped her decipher these words by listening to her pronunciation and asking her for the context in which they appeared
- after she had finished her turn there was a lot of class discussion about letter/sound connections as well as about unstressed syllables including suffixes and prefixes.

### Student 3

Characteristics:

- husband of S2
- took up challenge of following wife's strategies but with less success
- much more insecure character and far less willing to take risks
- progressed from no words per TV program to 2 or 3
- became an avid fan of *Water Rats*.

Strategies:

- new words included *viktim*, *dispir*, *difend*, *keptred*
- words *disappear* and *captured* led to another class discussion on word stress and unstressed syllables and how to guess which letter could be represented by the unstressed sound
- conceded that it was better to work independently rather than to rely on his children
- decided that it was very difficult to learn new words if he was watching for pure enjoyment
- still preferred it if someone would simply tell him the word and its meaning.

### Student 4

Characteristics:

- better reading and writing skills than all of the other students
- had some prior English in her native country
- listening and speaking skills were initially very poor
- whole activity became exciting as she discovered she could understand more and more words
- advantage was being able to spell the sounds more easily, eg *selebracion*, *perminent*, *hils*, *trust*, *desirabel*, *leeder*, *promicing*
- was learning up to a dozen new words per TV program.

Strategies:

- wanted to show off her ability to the other students by coming to the front of the class and writing all her words up on the board from memory

- at the same time explained some of the sound/spelling relationships she had rediscovered, eg the effect the letter e has on the end of a word and the sound of the letter y depending on its position in a word
- assured the other students that she was becoming less lazy and not asking her husband for the meaning any more but looking up the words in her dictionary instead.

Students 5 and 6 enrolled late and found it the most difficult. Both left before the end of the research project to go interstate. Student 6 was often absent.

### Student 5

Characteristics:

- eventually decided to try learning new words from TV
- a risk taker but very impatient at the same time
- not very successful.

Strategies:

- in the end the only way to elicit any words from him was to do it as a class activity on the board from memory
- I recorded a local news story for the class from which all students had to listen for one new word and he heard *aspekt* (*expect*) and *fishel* (*official*) but could find neither in the dictionary without help — S2 explained how to find them.

### Group B

The research took a slightly different turn with this group. Student 10, having had several years of English at school in her native country, Fiji, was the only one who had little trouble listening for new words. She also possessed all the traits of a good learner and was able to write down independently a long list of words from every TV program and find them in her dictionary — for example, *surveillance camera*, *ombudsman*, *moratorium*, *candidates*, *regulated*. She seemed to enjoy the exercise and acknowledged that her vocabulary had increased over the period of the research project.

Students 7, 8, and 9 continually came to class with no entries in their journals. Some said they could do it if they were allowed to ask their husbands for help, but they had collectively vowed not to do so. Student 9 often had a list of indecipherable scribbles in her book, the sounds of which she could not reproduce in class, so that I was unable to help her. Subsequently, I decided to record some programs for them and play them in class to see if we could come up with some successful strategies. I chose news items, as I had already ascertained that they all watched the news. We tried several, lasting from one minute to about ten minutes in length. The shorter the item, the more difficult they found it, mainly because it was too fast for them and they had no time to establish the context, let alone pick out individual words.

It was at this stage that Student 7 began to focus on the written words that often appear on the screen. She started writing them down as her new words and finding the meanings in her dictionary. Students 8 and 9 immediately liked this idea. I then asked them to listen for the same word again and, when they heard it, they were to call it out. I then stopped the videotape to listen to its sound. This did not always happen but several successful cases did occur — for example, with the words *murder*, *gambling*, *hold-up*, *tourist attraction*, *seahorse*, *investigation*, *justice*, *offences*, *swimming pool fees*, *elections*, *motorists*, *road toll*, *annual*, *full bloom*. Once the words had been heard, we would look at the letter/sound relationships and examine the phonemic alphabet. Student 9 continued to find this confusing, but Student 8 decided that this was an excellent strategy. Before long, she had mastered most of the sounds and from then on

she became confident listening for new words and dared to write them down. Until then, she had consistently refused to write anything down, saying that she could not possibly do it.

I then asked the students to go home and do the same. This time they did come back with lists of new words. Student 9 turned her attention to SBS and wrote down whole sentences that she had been unable to understand, eg *He tapped his fingers to the thumping beat of the music* and *I gave a silent thanks*. Interestingly, she also came with words such as *occasionally*, which she had not recognised in their written form. They had remained meaningless to her, even after looking them up in the dictionary. However, as soon as she heard the spoken word she recognised it instantly. Student 10 left the class before the completion of the research project to take up full-time work and was soon replaced by a beginner learner from Thailand. This student was unable to participate successfully in the project at such short notice.

## Conclusion

It was certainly possible for the students to learn new vocabulary from watching TV, regardless of their level of English language proficiency. However, most students needed a lot of initial support before they realised they could learn new vocabulary this way. Once the support was taken away, their ability weakened.

The ability to be successful appeared to be closely related to individual learning styles, and students seemed able to adopt new strategies only if they suited their learning styles.

Students from phonetic language backgrounds, such as the Balkan countries, appeared to be able to transcribe sounds more correctly than students from Asian language backgrounds.

The longer the program they watched, the more likely it was that they could pick up new words from it. Obviously, context played a large part in this, as learners had more time to understand the context of a longer program and they were also more likely to pick up a word that was repeated more than once.

Classroom discussions about vocabulary acquired, the difficulties encountered and the sharing of strategies led to an unusual bonding among the students, and lessons became entirely learner-centred.

Where the sound was too difficult to decipher, the research shifted to the written word that appeared on the TV screen, either with news items or as subtitles on SBS programs. This also became a valuable vocabulary acquisition tool.

## A personal reflection

I enjoyed participating in this research project and found it to be an invaluable activity. I learned a tremendous amount about the learning styles and preferences of my students and understood much better what the difficulties were for them. However, I feel that my data collection leaves much to be desired. As most of the data was given orally in class discussions and I wrote my reflections mostly at the end of the day, much of the rich treasure that comprised the language used by my students to describe their efforts was lost. I should have recorded it and transcribed some of the more delightful evidence given by my students. Although I was made aware of this method of data collection at the very beginning of my research, it completely slipped my mind and ultimately I had to rely heavily on my own memory of events.

Written evidence, produced by the students themselves, would have been extremely beneficial (besides their word lists), but I overlooked that also. I do believe though that both of these methods of data collection have their disadvantages in that the spontaneity would have been lost had the students known they were being recorded or if they had been asked to write about it. One of the reasons why they were so frank in their discussions is the fact that we all know each other so well. I would like to thank my students for their unfailing cooperation throughout this research project.

### 3 Using dictations in the classroom

Maria Wylie

#### Background

My initial interest in taking part in the vocabulary action research project was prompted by a sense that I needed to reflect on how I was teaching vocabulary in the classroom.

I had always found coursebooks such as the series *Build your vocabulary* 1, 2 and 3 by John Flower to be useful in supporting the presentation of topic and semantic-based lists and extending other parts of the lesson. However, I had a sense of dissatisfaction, as these exercises were often done in isolation. I always considered text types and grammar when planning courses and daily activities, but I wondered whether I left vocabulary as a secondary consideration. I was interested in the following questions related to vocabulary:

- Was vocabulary only a secondary consideration and never the driving force of a lesson?
- Did the students learn the new words presented through isolated exercises?
- Could the students see the point of learning the new words?

I was also interested in the fact that many students continually write word lists. From years of observation, I was aware that some of the most successful language learners are very systematic in the way that they develop and use word lists. My plan in undertaking the research was to:

- tap into the resource of student-generated word lists
- develop list-making skills with students who were not using this strategy.

I also planned to:

- encourage the students to revise classwork at home
- monitor vocabulary learning and retention.

I decided to use three variations on the technique of dictations: unseen dictations, copy dictations and the computer program *Storyboard*.

#### The class

There were 18 students in the class. They were assessed on the ASLPR scale at 1– to 1. Only three students had not completed secondary studies in their own country, while 11 students had done some tertiary studies. In general, the class was described as a fast-paced Certificate II in Spoken and Written English (CSWE II) level. The textbook chosen for the course was the *Certificate II in Spoken and Written English workbook* (NSW AMES 1999).

#### Student word lists

Students were given an exercise book, which was to be their dictation book. They were asked to write any new word that they encountered during the day in the front section

of the book. Initially, some students complained that there were too many new words. Students were then asked to record only the words they would like to learn. The back of the book was reserved for dictations. There were approximately three unseen dictations given per week.

McCarthy (1990:80) points out:

For many language teachers the broader questions of what vocabulary to teach will be in someone else's hands (syllabus designers, for example), or will have already been determined by the choice of coursebook or other factors.

This was obvious when the student lists were analysed. Many of the words in the lists were from the *Certificate II in Spoken and Written English workbook* (Joyce and Lukin 1999). However, there were also words that had been generated through teacher talk. For example, students recorded the words *nocturnal*, *winding burrow*, *webbed* and *platypus* from a unit on report writing in the textbook. However, they also recorded the word *hoax*. This word had occurred in an aside during the lesson when I explained the reaction of Europeans to the first sighting of a platypus.

Word entries in the exercise books indicated that the students:

- understood that learning vocabulary also involved learning old words in new combinations, eg *ended up*, *hands of a clock*, *on hand*, *be a sport*, *tired of doing*;
- recognised the need to learn certain words in groups, eg *drain pipes*, *what a shame*, *settle down*, *choppy swell*, *chill factor*, *partly cloudy*;
- used a range of other strategies to record the vocabulary, eg:
  - difficult words were written phonetically, eg *manure* – /mə'njuə/;
  - a simple phrase or example incorporating the words was recorded, eg *wee* (*use for children*), *Do you want a wee?*;
  - confusing words were differentiated, eg *scrub not the same as scrap*;
  - different grammatical functions of a word were recorded, eg *scoop* (*verb, noun*);
  - translations of new vocabulary were recorded.

## Unseen dictations

Books were collected at the end of each day, and from the word lists a dictation was prepared for the following day. The following example shows the lists made by three different students on the same day.

Student 1	<i>procedure</i> <i>hassle</i> <i>nuisance</i> <i>be a sport</i>	<i>immediately</i> <i>symptom</i> <i>to swell</i> <i>tender</i>	<i>to fracture</i> <i>to immobilise</i> <i>appropriate</i>
Student 2	<i>unscramble</i> <i>crowd</i> <i>hassle</i> <i>have a go</i> <i>be a sport</i>	<i>sweep</i> <i>nuisance</i> <i>might</i> <i>ache</i> <i>hiccough</i>	<i>owe</i> <i>overdue</i> <i>quit</i> <i>swell</i>
Student 3	<i>hiccough</i> <i>symptom</i>	<i>swell</i> <i>tender</i>	<i>fracture</i> <i>immobilise</i>

Writing the dictations required some creativity in linking the various words into one text. Although it is initially time consuming, it is a skill that can be quickly developed. The procedure was to:

- read each student contribution
- select the words that were common to most students
- draw up a final list, based on my own experience
- choose a text type currently being used in the classroom for the dictation.

The following dictation was a recount and was developed from the student word lists above.

#### Dictation: Recount

Last weekend Stephanie twisted her ankle while she was playing basketball. She put ice on her ankle immediately so it didn't swell very much. The next day she told her doctor her symptoms and he sent her for an X-ray. She was happy that there was no fracture. It was a nuisance when she went to work on Tuesday. She had to walk with the support of a stick. It was also a hassle getting on and off the bus.

McCarthy (1990:84) states that when deciding what vocabulary item to teach, teachers should consider its frequency in the language and the range of texts in which it occurs, but that in practice decisions are usually made from intuition. The overall effect was that the dictations were integrated into the language program rather than given as an isolated classroom activity. The students did not have a text to prepare for the dictations. Instead, they were asked to revise their lessons each day as preparation for the dictation at the end of the next day.

Time was allocated for self-correction at the end of each dictation. Students could either use dictionaries or worksheets from the previous day. At first, students wanted to correct every word, but time limits, coupled with increasing self-confidence, meant that students learnt to focus on difficult words only in the correction phase. One student, who spent a lot of time studying at home, chose never to self-correct in this way.

After reviewing the dictations, I returned the exercise books to the students the next morning. They were eager to see their results. Each morning, time would be spent on clarifying any questions. For example, in the dictation reproduced above, one student replaced the word *work* with the word *walk*, which still made sense but also showed a need for pronunciation work.

There were also benefits for students who did not come from a Roman script background. These students had problems spacing words and using capital letters. Through the dictations, I was able to check and give feedback on their handwriting.

## Copy dictations

Short passages were placed on the wall and students were asked to copy these into their books. Various configurations such as pair work and group or individual copying were trialled. Students liked to call these *copy dictations*.

The aims of these dictations were to assist students in:

- reading texts for meaning
- learning to chunk language
- learning from their mistakes to recognise spelling patterns that were difficult for them.

I decided to use passages from Alexander's *Practice and progress* (1967) because their length was ideal, they focused on a particular grammatical structure and they were generally in the form of a recount. Furthermore, the students enjoyed the humour in the passages. Other texts used were from newspaper articles.

## Storyboard

The class spent from 45 minutes up to an hour every week in the computer laboratory using the program *Storyboard*. Whereas the unseen dictations were based on the student word lists, the weekly storyboard text was based on re-creating student texts.

The *Certificate in Spoken and Written English II workbook* (Joyce and Lukin 1999) provided the model text. For example, students completed the brainstorming and language exercises in Unit K: *An eventful evening*. Students were then given the picture sequences from *Storylines* (Fletcher and Birt 1983) on *Jogging* and *The Dinner Party*. Students brainstormed the vocabulary to be used and then jointly reconstructed a recount for each sequence. The class then corrected each group text. On the day of the computer class, students were asked to reconstruct the teacher's recount of the same events.

During the computer class, students were asked to recall vocabulary learnt during the previous week. Students who may not have been very good spellers often were able to remember words very quickly. It was interesting to note that in this activity students would form different groups from those in class. All students were very active in this activity and did not like to miss a session in the computer room.

A variety of clozes were generated from the *Storyboard* text. These included deleting specific grammatical items such as verbs, prepositions and nouns. I also included a sixth-word deletion on the text to assess comprehension. All clozes were given to students on the days following the *Storyboard* class.

## Student evaluation

A total of 12 students responded to the following student evaluation survey. Questions were kept as simple as possible. Students were encouraged to answer the *other* questions in their own language and these were translated. A bilingual teacher assisted the Chinese students.

Student Survey	
To help your teacher plan future classes, could you please answer the following questions?	
1	How often did you write new words in your spelling book? <input type="checkbox"/> never <input type="checkbox"/> at least once a week <input type="checkbox"/> every day
2	Were any of these a problem for you:
	Too many new words <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Not enough new words <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Had to write words in two different books (spelling book and exercise book) <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Other: _____

Continued next page

3 Which activities helped you to learn new vocabulary during the course?

Clozes:  never  sometimes  always

Copy dictations:  never  sometimes  always

Dictations:  never  sometimes  always

*Storyboard* (computer stories)  never  sometimes  always

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4 Which activities helped you to assess/evaluate what you learnt during the course?

Clozes:  never  sometimes  always

Copy dictations:  never  sometimes  always

Dictations:  never  sometimes  always

*Storyboard* (computer stories)  never  sometimes  always

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5 In the dictations, what was most important for you? Please number the boxes in order of priority, eg 1 = the most important, 2 = the next most important, and so on.

Understanding the meaning of each word

Understanding the meaning of the story

Understanding the grammar of the story

Spelling the difficult words

Spelling the easy words

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6 After your teacher corrects your dictations, do you:

copy out your mistakes?  Yes  No

check you understand the meaning of the words?  Yes  No

try to memorise the words?  Yes  No

count the number of mistakes?  Yes  No

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

7 Are there any suggestions you would like to make about learning vocabulary or using dictations in the classroom?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Results

Students were reluctant to admit that they did not always write new words in their dictation books. Seven students responded that they always wrote in their books, while five students rated their participation rate at 3. In practice, only those students with good study skills automatically wrote words in their books throughout the lesson.

Poor attendance tended to correlate with inability to participate in the dictation activities. Students made too many mistakes and usually needed to copy the text. This reinforced my observations that other students were learning vocabulary. They were able to transfer their knowledge to new texts.

Only one student stated that there were not enough new words. More than half of the class said that there were too many new words. Students did not differentiate

between whether activities helped them to learn new vocabulary or to evaluate what they had learnt during the course.

Question 5 was interpreted by most students as asking them to nominate whether an aspect was Priority 1 or Priority 2. Only four students differentiated between all aspects. The majority of students believed that understanding the meaning of each word was Priority 1. A smaller number identified understanding the meaning of the story as Priority 1.

Most students reported that they followed up on their dictations by doing all the suggested activities in Question 6. Some students commented that they copied the corrected dictations into their books as extra practice.

One student commented that, although it was difficult to remember the correct spelling, it was useful to analyse new words. In correcting dictations, it was important to let students know that approximations were acceptable, especially if they could then use their dictionaries to correct their spelling.

Another student felt that more focus should have been given to the pronunciation of new vocabulary. A similar comment was that there should have been more opportunities to practise new vocabulary in conversation. A suggestion was to increase the reading of short stories to assist vocabulary development.

Another student commented that dictations had assisted in developing listening comprehension. Another liked the extra individual attention, continual marking and feedback. Another student saw the dictations as a means of practising writing and improving memory.

## Conclusion

The reason I joined this action research project was that I wanted to know how I could improve my approach to vocabulary development in the classroom. By using the various forms of dictations, my aim was to integrate vocabulary development into the overall course design.

My own observations and the evaluation showed that students responded well to the extra demands placed on them. In fact, there were students who requested extra homework. The student evaluation survey was also a valuable reminder that other areas — for example, the transfer of new vocabulary to the spoken mode — also needed individual attention. Most importantly, the activities that were set up gave me a greater understanding of the needs and styles of learning in this particular group of students. From this point of view, I will definitely incorporate these activities into future classes.

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## 4 Memorising morphemes with music

Merran Martin

### Introduction

Many beginner students bring feelings of anxiety, frustration and inadequacy when they enter the class for the first time. They are faced with the enormity of the task ahead of them, perhaps overwhelmed by the number of words and the complexity of the English language.

The comprehension and production of vocabulary are intrinsic parts of language acquisition, and the enormous amount of vocabulary to be learned by a beginning student has long been a concern for me.

The prospect of doing action research on vocabulary acquisition appealed to me. I thought it would be an opportunity to reflect on and document the strategies I generally used in my teaching, to try out some new ideas and to revisit some techniques I have used in the past. I also valued the chance to see how other teachers tackled this area of teaching across all the macro skills.

### The students

At the time of the project, my beginner students were new arrivals to Australia. They were in the midst of settling into a new community, learning to live in a new culture and feeling the stress of returning to the classroom, perhaps after many years as professional working people in their own countries. In their homeland they were independent and able to function in a society that was familiar to them. Suddenly they were thrust into a situation where they were dependent on others for their needs and were required to learn a new language in its most basic form in order to communicate.

The learners were enrolled in a CSWE I class. The class profile is outlined in the following table.

Language level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 0 to 0+ on the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR)</li> </ul>
Band	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• B stream students who had a study or professional background and would be expected to learn quickly</li> </ul>
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• between 19 and 47 years, with most students in their late 20s or early 30s</li> </ul>
Length of time in Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• majority had been in Australia less than three months</li> </ul>
Special needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• five students were humanitarian category entrants with a trauma background</li> </ul>
Nationalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• included Serbian, Bosnian, Cambodian, Chinese, Lao, Burmese and Colombian</li> </ul>

The class was conducted for 15 hours a week over 18 weeks and the period of the project was the first eight weeks. Two teachers conducted the class: my co-teacher

taught Monday to Wednesday and I taught the class on Thursdays and Fridays. The co-teacher was not involved with the project but was aware that the research was being conducted.

The class followed a program of themes designed to:

- orientate them to the Australian community
- integrate basic grammar
- prepare them for the tasks required to pass the prescribed competency-based assessment.

## The project

From my own experience as a learner of foreign languages, I was aware of the significant part that memory plays in learning vocabulary. Even when a word is understood, there may be quite a gap between comprehension and production. Vocabulary is necessary for the act of communication and is not an end in itself. I felt that in this project I needed to investigate vocabulary use in listening and reading (comprehension), as well as speaking and writing (production).

From my experience in teaching special groups of survivors of torture and trauma, I know that problems with memory and concentration, as well as the fear of performing, are symptoms of post-traumatic stress. I wanted to find ways of improving the acquisition of vocabulary in a stress-free manner.

## Language objectives

I wanted to observe how relaxation techniques might assist the students to achieve the following objectives:

- to memorise a large amount of vocabulary related to a set of themes
- to understand target vocabulary at an appropriate level
- to be able to translate this vocabulary into their native language
- to understand the vocabulary in written form
- to communicate confidently in spoken and written form, using the vocabulary at an appropriate level
- to apply the vocabulary in real-life settings.

It was important to me that the students did not simply learn a list of words by rote, but that, to some degree, they also mastered other linguistic skills such as fluency, accuracy, comprehension of texts, creative writing and understanding grammar. I needed to integrate all these aspects into my teaching of vocabulary, so that the learners could store the words in their memory and then retrieve and use them in appropriate situations.

## Adaptation of some aspects of *Suggestopedia* methodology

In the 1980s, Bulgarian psychiatrist and educator Dr Georgi Lozanov created a method to accelerate learning called *Suggestopedia*. Other researchers developed or adapted his method.

Darbyshire (1985:94) describes the method as a combination of physical relaxation, mental concentration and suggestive principles that strengthen a person's ego and expand their memory capabilities to the accompaniment of relaxing music, while material to be learned is presented dynamically.

From my reading about Suggestopedia, it seemed that few teachers used the approach as it was intended, mainly owing to problems of cost effectiveness, scheduling and other administrative factors. Critics of Suggestopedia imply that there is little appreciable difference to the rate of learning through this approach in comparison to other methods.

I had had some contact with Suggestopedia techniques in my early years of teaching and felt that some aspects deserved another look, particularly in view of my concerns with my current group.

## Research methods

I was keen to place the main emphasis of my teaching on vocabulary, but not to neglect the other components of language learning. There were also time constraints to be considered, as I taught this class for only two sessions per week.

I decided to write a short journal entry for each class session, recording the vocabulary introduced, any variations in methodology and my impressions of student responses. These responses were gauged through simple questions such as:

- How are you feeling?
- Did you remember that?
- Was that easy?
- Are you happy?

Retention and the ability to use new vocabulary were evaluated through a variety of activities that I would normally use in my teaching, such as oral and written clozes, matching words and pictures, spelling exercises, pronunciation exercises, role-plays, controlled and free writing, reading comprehension and casual conversation. General impressions of the results of these exercises were noted in my journal.

It was most beneficial to invite three experienced volunteer home tutors into the class to facilitate small conversation groups for an hour at the end of each week. A theme was set to cover the target vocabulary, and the tutors would focus the conversation on that theme. I was then free to roam among the groups listening to the way in which the students managed the vocabulary during the conversation. It was then possible to know which vocabulary needed to be reinforced in a subsequent lesson.

At the end of the research period, I distributed a questionnaire to assess whether the students thought that the relaxation techniques had been useful for them. As their level of English was low, I ensured that each student had a family member or friend who could translate the questionnaire and work with them to complete it.

Students were exposed to different ways of learning new words during the course, particularly as my co-teacher was not using the relaxation techniques. They could make a comparison and comment on how effective different methods were for them.

## The sequence of teaching activities

Welcome: In order to provide a welcoming and relaxing classroom environment, I arranged for relaxing *mood music* (classical pieces or Tony O'Connor tapes) to be playing as the students arrived in class. The newly refurbished room was attractive, with good natural lighting from large windows. Writing tables and chairs were set in an open circle. Students spontaneously responded to the pleasant atmosphere by bringing in fresh flowers each week.

- Warm-up: A short warm-up consisting of casual conversation about our lives and our families was designed to help the students to feel at ease and not threatened by the learning situation.
- Review: I conducted a brief review of the previously taught language. I concentrated this review on vocabulary in context. This short assessment took the form of an oral or written cloze, a spelling test or word/picture matching exercise. I generally assessed the students on the vocabulary from the previous lesson, but sometimes also from other lessons.
- Presentation: In the presentation phase of the lesson, the new target language was introduced, based on the particular theme for that lesson. Over the period of the project these included: Personal Identification (including alphabet, numbers, dates, names of countries etc), Classroom Words and Instructions, Directions, Shopping (food and clothing) and Health (body parts, ailments and medicine).
- New words were introduced dynamically, providing as many links between language and meaning as possible. I wanted to link the spoken word with a visual image. Commonly, *realia* was used in the form of classroom objects, for example stationery, furniture, fruit, vegetables, countable and uncountable ingredients, items of clothing, the contents of a first aid kit and many others. These things were brought in to be passed around and used in a variety of situations requiring different language. I felt that it was important for the students to have a physical response to the new vocabulary, especially when verbs or prepositions were being taught. In addition, we used posters, pictures and board drawings to illustrate the meanings of new words, as well as various actions and gestures. By using a variety of activities to reinforce the new vocabulary, my intention was to cater for the needs of students favouring different learning styles: auditory, visual and kinaesthetic.
- The new vocabulary was always introduced in a sentence, even at the most basic level (eg *It's an apple*). Wherever possible, the sentence was accompanied by a reference to an object or picture to enhance the meaning. For instance, a series of adjectives was more meaningful when illustrated in context: *Natasha is tall and Mi Khin is short*. In addition, I always tried to present the new language in a socially realistic way, by inviting students to be part of the presentation, whether by using a question/answer format or a role-play. There was always a sense of fun, movement and interaction in this stage of the lesson, as well as a strong emphasis on speaking practice.
- Reinforcement: The latter part of the lesson concerned the reinforcement of the new language, usually in conjunction with some previously acquired language. I wanted the learners to experience using the language as quickly as possible to maintain the linkage between comprehension and production. As stated previously, the practice phase included the sorts of language activities that I normally use in my teaching. This allowed me to see whether the students were able to use the vocabulary in a range of contexts.

**Word target:** I asked the students to target 10 to 12 key words from the lesson that they felt they especially needed to retain, because of usefulness, difficulty or for any other reason. They were encouraged, as a class, to group these words according to *word families* (eg lists of nouns, adjectives, irregular verbs or names of vegetables, colours etc). The list of choices was then written on large sheets of paper to be left on the noticeboard for the whole week. The students also copied these and any other new words, together with a translation, into their own small vocabulary books, to be carried around with them and studied during spare moments. The students also knew that the key words would be the focus of some assessment or review at the beginning of the next lesson.

**Relaxation:** For the last ten minutes of each session, overhead lights were turned off, curtains drawn and the students were asked to put all their work away. I then put on some Baroque music with a rhythm of 60 beats per minute, about the same as the heartbeat. This, according to Suggestopedia theory, aids long-term memory retention. I asked the students to close their eyes, breathe deeply and to relax each part of their body. The intention was to calm the students down and help them to feel receptive. I asked the students to listen attentively to my voice and to visualise the words I repeated. After a little while I began slowly repeating key words from the lesson. The same words were then repeated in a substitution format. For example:

- Can you tell me the way to the *hospital*?
- Can you tell me the way to the *post office*?
- Can you tell me the way to the *bus stop*?

After that, the words were repeated in other meaningful chunks, either phrases or sentences, which had been used in the lesson. The intention was to give meaning to the target vocabulary and to assist memorisation.

## The findings

My journal entries indicate that the students responded well to the strategies, even from the beginning of the project. I had a sense that they had not experienced relaxation exercises before, and certainly not in a classroom situation. However, for them everything was new. Perhaps they felt that this was yet another way that things were done differently in Australia. At the beginning, I noted that it was necessary to ensure that everyone was settled before we started the concluding relaxation phase, as some seemed to want to continue writing or to pack up bags, even after the music had started. However, they were very receptive when I made it clear what I wanted. I also found that it was important not to continue past the normal class finishing time, otherwise there was some restlessness about getting away and catching buses, and the noise from departing students from other classes was disruptive, causing tension. Therefore, I needed to ensure that I allowed adequate time before the end of the lesson so as not to rush the relaxation period. Generally, I felt that the relaxation techniques were valuable for the students.

This was confirmed by the results of the questionnaire below, which was given out towards the end of the research period. Twelve students completed the questionnaire, one student having withdrawn from the class due to poor health.

WHAT HELPS YOU TO LEARN NEW WORDS IN ENGLISH?				
Section A	Not helpful	Little helpful	Helpful	Very helpful
1 Using a bilingual dictionary				
2 Using an English dictionary				
3 Asking a friend				
4 Making a list with translation				
5 Exercises in class with music				
6 Exercises in class with no music				
7 Understanding a new word from the sentence				
8 Using the computer				
9 Reading English books or newspapers				
10 Other _____				

Section B	No	A little	A lot
• Does relaxation music help you to learn new words in English?			

Section C	Relaxed	Sleepy	Bored	Mentally active
• How do you feel during the relaxation time?				

Section D	Yes	No
• In Term 4, would you like to continue listening to relaxation music to help you to remember new words?		

Section E
• Can you think of any other ways you would like to learn new words in English?

Section A listed nine different methods of learning vocabulary. I was most interested in method 5: exercises in class with music. Of the 12 students, six found this method very helpful, two found it helpful, four found it a little helpful and no students indicated that it was not helpful. The highest response was in the very helpful category.

A more direct response was required in Section B to the question: *Does relaxation music help you to learn new words in English?* Ten of the 12 students responded: *A lot*. The other two responded: *A little*.

The aim of Section C was to gauge the feelings of the students during the relaxation period and to identify whether they were using this time to memorise the new vocabulary. Some students ticked more than one box and one student added the comment that she felt differently on different days. She had in fact ticked all four boxes and was the only student to indicate that she sometimes felt either bored or sleepy. All the other students indicated that they felt either relaxed or mentally active and there was an equal number of ticks in each of these boxes.

The results of the responses to Section D showed unanimous approval of relaxation with music and the desire of all students to continue the method for the remainder of the course. Another small indicator of the success of the relaxation methods came from unsolicited comments made by the volunteer tutors, who have also worked with me in two previous classes. All three noted that this particular group seemed very friendly and relaxed, and were making great progress with their language skills.

## Conclusion

I elected not to use the Suggestopedia method as it was intended, mainly because of the constraints of time. I felt that I did not have sufficient time to study and fully acquaint myself with the scientific background of the method.

I was mindful of the concept that people have a tendency to recall best the things that they have learned first and last in a sequence. This belief seemed to fit in well with the aspects of Suggestopedia that I wanted to adapt. These included helping the students to be relaxed when the material was first presented and to consciously put them in a relaxed state before reviewing all the new language.

One aspect that my action research brought into focus, and that I would change if I continue to use these techniques, is to place more emphasis on the positive suggestion component of the method. From my reading about Suggestopedia, I understand that most teachers emphasise the relaxation and music components, and this is certainly what I did. In future, I would include both verbal and written statements, such as: *English is easy, You can learn English and You will remember these words*. Hopefully, this positive reinforcement would increase student belief in themselves and break down some of the negative attitudes that many bring to the classroom, even before they have started to learn.

I found the collaboration with my colleagues over the course of this project to be very beneficial. Their input helped me to refine my investigation and they gave me valuable insights into the action research process. It was also interesting to look at the teaching of vocabulary from different perspectives and I have come away with some good ideas for my own teaching in the future.

It was important for me to research the effectiveness of what I already do in my teaching, combined with some new techniques that might enhance these strategies. I did not want to research a method that would be interesting for the project but too time consuming or impractical to use as a general rule. The results indicate that the relaxation methods are valuable, and yet they do not require any major adjustment to

my teaching style. It will be easy to incorporate them into my future lessons and to recommend them for use by other teachers who may be interested. Most importantly, the positive reactions from the students indicate that they found the techniques useful and enjoyable in their language learning.

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## 5 *Song stuck in my head*

Sandra Wood

### The class

I worked with a group of 11 students who were attending a part-time class in the AMEP in Canberra. I taught them for three 3-hour sessions over a period of eight weeks. Six students were studying CSWE II and five were studying CSWE III. Most had attended my class the previous semester. The profile of the group is outlined in the following table.

Nationalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 Croatian</li> <li>• 3 Bosnian</li> <li>• 1 Iranian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Indonesian</li> <li>• 2 Afghani</li> <li>• 2 Thai</li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 to 12 years</li> </ul>	
Ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mid-20s to early 50s</li> </ul>	
Length of residence in Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• one to two years</li> </ul>	

### The research

The questions I wished to investigate were:

- What is the effectiveness of songs in retaining vocabulary?
- How can I encourage students to use an English language dictionary in conjunction with their first language dictionaries?

From my reading about the use of songs in the ESL classroom, I had extracted some positive reasons for making more use of them in my classroom (Davanellos 1999). Songs are appropriate to the classroom because they are highly memorable. We have all experienced the *song stuck in my head* phenomenon. Songs seem to lodge in both our short-term and long-term memory and make it easier to remember chunks of language. Songs are also part of everyday life. We constantly hear and sing songs, so why not make them part of the language learning process? Songs should also be included in the classroom because they:

- are highly motivating
- are personal
- provide natural opportunities for meaningful repetition
- provide examples of everyday language
- are easy to find
- bring variety to the lesson
- aid relaxation and group dynamics
- are fun
- can deal with taboo subjects.

I feel that the use of songs is still underexploited in the classroom. Yet the potential of song lyrics is so rich. They can be studied in so many different ways and can serve as a springboard for a variety of language learning activities.

A young German, back in the 1970s, who admitted to learning all his English from songs by the Beatles, has always lingered in the back of my mind. I have always been interested in incorporating songs on a regular basis into my program but, until this opportunity of doing action research on vocabulary, I had always managed to relegate it to the pile of *things to do if there is time*.

Texts linked with music are a powerful way of learning vocabulary. Furthermore, they are a fun way of teaching English. I have always believed that it is easier to learn when you are enjoying the work. This reminds me of another comment made while teaching English in Germany. A parent expressed surprise at how her child seemed to be learning so much in my class, in spite of having fun! Although this comment was about a child's learning, I believe the same applies to adults.

It had been of growing concern to me that students were very reluctant to use English language dictionaries, choosing to rely on their bilingual dictionaries. While recognising the efficiency of using these dictionaries, their limited scope meant students would use vocabulary inappropriately. By introducing them to an English language dictionary in a more formal and consistent manner than I had in the past, I wanted to overcome that reluctance. I chose to use a class set of the *Macquarie junior dictionary*.

For the purposes of this action research I wanted to combine the activities of using songs and dictionaries to see if they could be effectively blended. I found the combination both interesting and complementary. I felt that the initial studying of vocabulary from dictionary work would appeal to those students who liked to see the words and/or enjoyed a more logical and analytical study of the words. The activity of listening to songs would appeal to those students who had a *good ear* and/or were intuitive in their approach to learning English. By bringing these approaches together, I hoped to cover the learning preferences of all my students.

I adopted the following research methods for this study:

- I told the class about the research project and the activities it would involve.
- I kept a record of my observations and thoughts, and any feedback from my students.
- I gave the students a vocabulary test at the end of the eight weeks, and repeated this test four weeks later.
- I devised and distributed a questionnaire.

## Goals

The students had chosen to study part-time because they either had part-time work or had family commitments. A few had long-term study goals, but on the whole the group was more interested in gaining insights into the Australian way of life and getting their children settled into school.

My aims were to:

- provide the students with learning strategies that could be extended beyond the classroom
- enable the students to become more independent in their learning
- assist the students in linking into mainstream resources, such as the use of the local library and the radio.

## Classroom activities and materials

I initially selected one Harry Belafonte song, *There's a hole in my bucket*, for its repetitiveness and humour, and then three songs from the Beatles — *She's leaving home*, *When I'm sixty-four* and *Lovely Rita*. I chose vocabulary from the songs that would be useful in everyday life. I divided the activities into pre-study, while-studying and post-study activities.

### Pre-study activities

The purpose of this stage was to introduce the new vocabulary, free of context. Students had to look up the words in the English language dictionary and write down the definitions. This was often done in pairs, and the process of using the dictionary helped them to become familiar with the layout. Initially, I got them to copy down the definitions in their workbooks, but soon changed this to providing more directive handouts (see sample activity below). In my selection of vocabulary, I purposely selected idioms as well as words with more than one meaning.

#### Sample pre-study activity    DICTIONARY WORK

A    Look up the meanings of these words in the *Macquarie dictionary* and write them down.

Discreet (adjective)	
Discreetly (adverb)	
A glimpse (noun)	
To look <u>like</u> (adjective)	
A maid (noun)	1 2
To make (verb)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
A meter (noun)	
To tow (verb)	
To win (verb)	1 2 3
To wink (verb)	

B    Listen to and read the song. Tick the meaning that is right for this song.

### While-studying activities

At this stage, I introduced the song to the class. There were a variety of ways to do this, but my favoured approach was to give them the text minus those words and phrases which they had previously looked up in the dictionary. This forced them to listen very intently for the missing words. It was necessary to play the song more than once — in fact, as many times as needed. After that they would discuss and compare their responses. Only when this activity had been fully exhausted would I show the completed text on the overhead.

This usually invited further discussion, either on the meaning of the song or on the specific vocabulary. At this point they had to refer to their worksheet dictionary definitions to establish the appropriate meaning for this context.

At this stage there were several possibilities as to how to treat the text. My students did not seem inclined to sing aloud, so I let them mouth the words. We also read the songs aloud without music. To reinforce the learning, I would play the song at every opportunity — for example, before class commenced, during break times and as background when appropriate.

I also encouraged them to borrow my CD or cassette, or to obtain it from their local library (public libraries stock a good supply of Beatles music), so that they could listen to it at home. This activity of seeking out the CD at their local library, although a by-product of the main activity, furthered their ability to develop independent learning strategies.

The activity of listening to the songs at home invited involvement with their families. Quite a number of them had young children, who were also learning English at school, so it provided the whole family with an opportunity to talk about the song, listen to it and even sing it together!

One student learnt to play the songs on guitar, together with his children. This brings me to an important part of the learning process. So much student learning occurs beyond the classroom, and although we teach learning strategies in class, we have very little control or influence over what learning occurs outside class times. I hoped that this approach would increase the possibility of learning beyond the class, but in a realistic and enjoyable way. After all, many people listen to music while they are doing things around the house, and in this way I could use it to enhance the students' learning.

One student remarked on how he had recognised one of the songs when it was played on radio. This kind of experience not only reinforces what we do in class but helps connect the students to the wider community. Another positive connection occurs when the parents learn the same song as their children do in school, eg *There's a hole in my bucket*.

### Post-study activities

In a follow-up session, I introduced matching exercises (see sample activity next page) where the targeted words had to be matched with the dictionary definitions. The final exercise was a crossword, where the clues were once again the dictionary definitions. This was quite a time-consuming activity for the teacher to develop. This was usually done as homework. Naturally, this same process could be done with any kind of text or discourse.

Because of time constraints and choice of songs, I followed this approach with all the songs. However, depending on the selection, there are many possible ways of using songs, particularly in the choice of themes. One song we used, *She's leaving home*, lends itself very well to conversion into a narrative text. With this song, students were very

interested in hearing about how Australian families deal with this issue. This could have been explored much more, but I did not pursue it because it would have required more class time than we had. However, I rewrote the song as a cloze exercise in narrative form, and the students answered some questions about the content of the song. Obviously, in this kind of follow-up, the vocabulary becomes the underpinning for both written and spoken discussion.

**Sample post-study activity    DICTIONARY WORK**

A    Look up the underlined words in the *Macquarie junior dictionary*.

1    I could be handy, mending a fuse.  
 How many meanings are there for:  
 handy?    \_\_\_\_\_  
 mend?    \_\_\_\_\_  
 fuse?    \_\_\_\_\_  
 Write out the best meaning for each word in the above sentence:  
 handy:    \_\_\_\_\_  
 mend:    \_\_\_\_\_  
 fuse:    \_\_\_\_\_

2    You could knit a sweater by the fireside.  
 How many meanings are there for the word *knit*?    \_\_\_\_\_  
 Write out the best meaning for *knit* in the above sentence:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

3    Digging the weeds.  
 Look up the word *weed* in the dictionary. What does it mean?  
 Find the adjective from *weed*.    \_\_\_\_\_  
 Give the comparative and superlative form.

## Findings

### Results of the vocabulary tests

At the end of the term, I gave the students a vocabulary exercise incorporating a selection of vocabulary from the four songs. Most of the students successfully completed it, referring to their earlier worksheets for answers. I then gave this as a test at the commencement of the new term. Of the eight students who were present, three got less than half marks and five over. Perhaps if I had devised a test that focused more on recognition of these words rather than their production, they would have been more successful, since, on reflection, the main focus of my work had been on recognition rather than production.

### Student questionnaire

At the end of the research, I asked the 11 students to complete the following questionnaire on the research task.

<b>QUESTIONNAIRE</b>				
A To study vocabulary we listened to songs and did some exercises. Tick your response to the songs in this table.				
<i>There's a hole in my bucket</i>	I liked the song <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	The song was: <input type="checkbox"/> too fast <input type="checkbox"/> too slow <input type="checkbox"/> just right	The number of words: <input type="checkbox"/> too many <input type="checkbox"/> too few <input type="checkbox"/> just right	
<i>She's leaving home</i>	I liked the song <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	The song was: <input type="checkbox"/> too fast <input type="checkbox"/> too slow <input type="checkbox"/> just right	The number of words: <input type="checkbox"/> too many <input type="checkbox"/> too few <input type="checkbox"/> just right	
<i>When I'm sixty-four</i>	I liked the song <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	The song was: <input type="checkbox"/> too fast <input type="checkbox"/> too slow <input type="checkbox"/> just right	The number of words: <input type="checkbox"/> too many <input type="checkbox"/> too few <input type="checkbox"/> just right	
<i>Lovely Rita</i>	I liked the song <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	The song was: <input type="checkbox"/> too fast <input type="checkbox"/> too slow <input type="checkbox"/> just right	The number of words: <input type="checkbox"/> too many <input type="checkbox"/> too few <input type="checkbox"/> just right	
B Which song was your favourite? _____				
C Did you listen to the songs with your family? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes				
D How often in the week did you listen to the songs? Please tick the appropriate box.				
	<b>4 or 5 times</b>	<b>2 or 3 times</b>	<b>Once</b>	<b>Never</b>
<i>There's a hole in my bucket</i>				
<i>She's leaving home</i>				
<i>When I'm sixty-four</i>				
<i>Lovely Rita</i>				
E Did you like this way of learning new words? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No				
F Do you find that you use these new words when you speak English outside our English classes? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No				

Continued next page

G Would you like us to continue with songs?  Yes  No

H Do you have any suggestions for other songs? \_\_\_\_\_

I We also did some language exercises to help us learn the vocabulary. Tick the appropriate box.

Vocabulary exercise	Very helpful	Helpful	Not helpful
Using the English language dictionary			
Matching vocabulary from song with dictionary meanings			
Crossword			
Filling in the missing words of the song			

Student responses were as follows:

- All of the students enjoyed the selection of songs, although one expressed dislike for *Lovely Rita*.
- Generally, the group was happy with the pace of the songs, but four students found *Lovely Rita* too fast.
- On the number of new words for each song, there was a fairly even spread between the suggestions of too many, too few and just right. This possibly reflects the fact that there were both CSWE II and CSWE III students in the group.
- Six students listed *There's a hole in my bucket* as their favourite. The humour appealed to them, and anyway who can resist Harry Belafonte! This was the first song I introduced to them, and many recognised the song, as they had heard it sung in their language. One student said that her child had learnt it at school here.
- There was a mixed response to the question of whether the students listened together with their family. Five students did and two did sometimes. This certainly would have been affected by their access to the songs.
- Seven of the students listened to the songs about two or three times a week, three listened four or five times a week and one listened every day.
- All of the students enjoyed learning new words this way.
- Three or four students indicated that they had used the new words outside class but this was difficult to quantify. In class, some were able to cite examples of situations where they had used new words, mostly from *There's a hole in my bucket* and *She's leaving home*.
- All of the students were interested in continuing with songs in the following term. They were happy to leave the choice of songs up to me, although one Thai student was keen to learn *Let it be* and *Yesterday*.
- Another student wrote that he did not like singing aloud in class, but enjoyed listening.

The last part of the questionnaire was concerned with exercises associated with the use of the dictionary and the post-study activities. Only one student ticked the *Not helpful* box for the crossword. Otherwise, the results were evenly spread between *Helpful* and *Very helpful*.

## Reflections on the research

I thoroughly enjoyed the whole process of doing this action research, particularly because it allowed me the opportunity to meet regularly with my colleagues and discuss the issue of teaching vocabulary in the classroom. There was so much sharing of ideas that we all came away from this experience with a wealth of ideas to use in our teaching. My whole teaching practice was given a new lease of life, which of course was of great benefit to the students.

A number of factors became a source of frustration for me. I often felt a little regretful that I had to curtail the number of songs and some of the activities owing to the length of the term, which was only eight weeks. When I look back at my notes, a frequent comment about the exercises was *insufficient time to complete in class*. The action research requirements had to be balanced with the need to fulfil the requirements of the CSWE competencies with a group of part-time students whose attendance could at times be erratic. Consequently, our vocabulary work became an add-on, an approach I do not normally favour.

Accepting these limitations, I came to regard this action research as the chance to:

- test the use of songs in the classroom
- gain self-confidence in introducing songs to students
- see how the research could be a springboard to further work on using songs in the classroom.

I felt that I successfully achieved these outcomes.

In the sequencing of the activities, there is very little difference between the teaching of songs and any other kind of text. All of the activities could be done using any kind of text, but the effectiveness of learning here lies in the linking of words with music. The repetitiveness and the rhyming words, together with the music, have a powerful effect on the memory. We have all experienced how easily the words to a song come flooding back into our memory, even though it may have been 20 years since last hearing it.

During the action research, I found that, with the introduction of each new song, my mind would become fixated on the words and music to such an extent that I would wake up in the night with the words literally stuck in my head. A few of my students also experienced this, especially when they played the song late in the evening.

Preparing teaching materials was time consuming, but satisfying. There is a huge range of good commercially produced ESL songs available, but I chose not to use these because of my wish to link my students to mainstream music, rather than narrowly focused ESL songs.

With the dictionary work, I did not feel that I successfully helped my students make the transition to English language dictionaries. Perhaps I was over-optimistic. One student did buy a second-hand dictionary, but unless I brought a set of dictionaries to class on a regular basis and had the students refer to them for vocabulary meanings, the exercise did not seem very effective, at least at this stage of their language development.

I did not push my class into singing the songs aloud, mainly through my own lack of self-confidence about singing. Perhaps this is one reason why we do not use songs much in the classroom. Yet it is the actual singing of the songs that is a fundamental part of the whole activity, helping to bind words and phrases in the memory.

I cannot, in an objective way, measure how effective student learning was. However, the individual comments and the students' obvious enjoyment of the songs have given me the confidence to make songs an integral part of my teaching. In fact, I am planning

to start a regular timeslot in the program where all the classes come together to sing. I hope to create a choir from this.

## Further suggestions

The choice of songs in the classroom can be quite broad. In my view, the following songs are suitable for the classroom:

### Beatles songs

*Imagine*  
*Ebony and ivory*  
*And I love her*  
*Lucy in the sky with diamonds*  
*The fool on the hill*  
*She's leaving home*  
*Yesterday*  
*Let it be*  
*If I fell*  
*For no-one*  
*All my loving*

### Show tunes

*I'll do anything* from *Oliver*  
*Somewhere over the rainbow* from *The Wizard of Oz*  
*The rain in Spain* from *My Fair Lady*  
*If I were a rich man and Sunrise, Sunset* from *Fiddler on the Roof*  
*Memory* from *Cats*  
*All I ask of you* from *The Phantom of the Opera*  
*Oh what a beautiful morning* from *Oklahoma*  
*Somewhere* from *West Side Story*

For the narrative competencies of the CSWE, some country and western music is ideal. Poetry can also be introduced through songs, and some of the songs from well-known musicals are wonderful to use. Australian songs are very popular and, through careful selection, it is possible to work them into quite a few of the CSWE competencies.

Although this action research focused on vocabulary, songs can be used for much broader purposes, such as grammar and pronunciation and as part of a theme.

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## 6 Meaty chunks

Theresa Kozar

### The class

At the time of the project, I was teaching a CSWE I class at the St Albans Centre in Melbourne. I taught the class of mostly newly arrived beginners for two terms. The number of students remained around 20 for most of the course. The following table outlines the class profile:

Language level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 0 or 0+ (ASLPR)</li></ul>
Countries of origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• two main groups were from Bosnia and Vietnam</li><li>• other students were from Romania, Macedonia, China, Albania, and Turkey</li></ul>
Previous language learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• most students were attending their first formal English class</li><li>• six students had attended one or two terms of classes previously but had not made significant gains</li></ul>
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the majority of students were aged between 25 and 35 with an equal number younger and older than this age group</li></ul>
Educational background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• half the students had over twelve years of education</li><li>• a few had less than six years of education</li><li>• the majority were familiar with formal learning settings</li></ul>

### Focus question

I became involved in the vocabulary project because I was curious about why some words stick in the consciousness of learners while others prove elusive. I decided to look at the question: *What makes words, or chunks of words, matter in the language classroom?* I wanted to focus on the kinds of classroom activities that promote the learning of new language.

In discussions with the project group about possible focus questions, it was suggested I include the notion of *chunks*, since words do not exist in isolation. I was grateful for this suggestion, as it made me consider the sound of the words — in other words, their music.

### The process

I approached the project through the following strategies:

- Strategy 1: Discussions with colleagues**  
The project workshops provided information on current research and issues related to vocabulary. It was of particular interest to me to hear that pronunciation was an issue with learners. This focused my attention on teaching the sounds of new words, as well as groups of words. In these sessions, project teachers were able to compare

strategies and support each other. It was helpful to put our research into a broader context and give it perspective.

**Strategy 2: Journal keeping**

I made notes on my teaching program and I kept a journal where I jotted down observations after class.

**Strategy 3: Consultations with learners**

The learners were beginners and it was difficult to explain my participation in the project. However, I made it clear that I was engaged in extra work on vocabulary and there would be a stronger focus on vocabulary learning in class. The students seemed happy with this. I usually had some time in the lesson where we reflected on whether an activity was helpful or enjoyable.

**Strategy 4: Professional and personal reading**

Professional reading helped to give clearer definition to the many facets of vocabulary teaching. The reading helped me articulate more concisely particular problem areas in my own teaching, and it was refreshing to encounter new ways of addressing familiar concerns.

Ming (1997) provided me with useful pointers on innovative ways to teach vocabulary. His three conditions for vocabulary retrieval — ie *attending, retrieving and generation* — were helpful in giving me more encouragement and confidence in making tasks or activities the primary focus of my work with vocabulary.

Wingate (1993:45) describes a whole-brain approach to learning language, asserting that '*students should practise and explore a new word until it fully integrates with their lives*'. Reading about different types of activities that stimulate more than just the intellect, I began to see how it could be frustrating for the students to be presented with sheets full of printed matter. I decided, as much as possible, to develop activities that would appeal to as many of the senses as possible. I wanted to use imagination, fantasy, music and emotions to balance the dryness of the conceptual aspect of vocabulary learning.

Glasser (1998) articulated a theory of a quality world that we each carry around with us. He maintains that when relationships break down in certain areas of our life, then that particular area is taken out of our quality world; that is, it no longer matters. I wondered then about the histories of my learners and what part wounded relationships were playing in the dynamic between teaching and learning that was taking place in my classes.

Other professional reading provided me with information about current research into vocabulary acquisition. Of particular interest to me were Coady and Huckin (1997), who referred to *contextual acquisition research*, which demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge comes from meaningful language encounters. They use the terms *authentic, rich in content, enjoyable* and *comprehensible* to describe elements evident in more successful learning.

## Classroom activities

Over the two terms with this class, I experimented with various classroom activities to stimulate vocabulary learning. These are outlined below.

### Stories

I introduced sentence-length structures from the first week. I used the stories from *Very easy true stories* (Heyer 1998) where meaning is illustrated in pictures that accompany the sentences. I also used a new Australian computer program, *Connected speech* (Protea Textware 2001), which focuses on phrasing. I felt that if the students could tune into the natural pauses in strings of words, then there would be contact with a special kind of *internal bodily awareness* (Gendlin 1978). The stories also provided escapism, the opportunity for visual imagery and that special element of mystique.

In the second, term the class heard a longer story, as a serial over several days. This was a romance entitled *The house on the hill* (Laird 1978), which has particularly effective sound effects and dramatisation on the recording. The music in the introductions to each part adds an evocative sense of mood to the words. The book also has attractive coloured illustrations that contribute to a more rounded experience of the language. I jotted down all the more unusual words that I thought might be unfamiliar. I was interested to see how well the learners understood the meanings and could recall them the next day. Of course, the words were recycled, often within the story, so there were many opportunities for hearing them.

### Total physical response activities and mime

As much as possible I developed activities that used total physical response, and there was a lot of mime and passing of mini-conversations around the class. These activities were highly enjoyable and generated a lot of laughter. I will add here that it helped tremendously having some learners in the group who had a strong sense of the absurd.

### Excursions

In the second term, we went on an excursion each week for the first four weeks. I was interested to see if the meaning of new words would *stick* more effectively when they were subsequently used in a range of text types generated from the excursions. However, I think I got a little carried away with the sheer volume of new words, so sure was I that the learners would want to express their responses to their experiences. However, this was not the case and I was surprised at how little interest the learners had in using the words in generating their own texts.

### Computer programs

New vocabulary was introduced using the *Interactive Picture Dictionary* both in preparation for the abovementioned excursions and to have word sets for text production.

### Videos

I used the video course *English, have a go* to reinforce grammar points relevant to the texts the learners were producing. Both the language used and the situations were authentic, and the program introduced learners to some Australian culture. The language seemed to make a big impression and was generally retained for text production.

## Rote learning

As an experiment, I trialled some rote learning. I wrote long sentences with several phrases of circumstance on the board and asked the students if they could learn them. The students clearly indicated that they were horrified at the prospect. However, they were amazed at how easy they were to remember, when the sentences were broken into the natural phrasing and they learnt one phrase at a time. This reinforced the concepts of noun groups and phrases of circumstance. The activity was reproduced in the computer room when recalling texts for the *Storyboard* program. The sentences were always from those read in class so the learners were familiar with them, and their satisfaction was obvious when they could complete the cloze with minimal reference to the full text, then type it onto the wordpad.

## Coursebook

At the end of both the first and the second terms, I brought sets of *Headstart* and *New Headway: Elementary* to the classroom. The learners were given a reading task to self-assess their ability to comprehend written texts. The students were asked to read silently texts about topical people and places. The deep silence in the room and the lack of reference to dictionaries showed student confidence in extracting meaning from what was being read. There was much satisfaction with being able to understand simple passages. For many there were only a few words that were new to them and they were encouraged to guess the meanings of these new words from the context. I recorded several of the unknown words and tested the learners the next day. All remembered the meaning, since the context had been so graphic.

## Reflections

I did see evidence of learners paying attention to phrasing in their spoken language. This authentic phrasing made a difference, with learner language sounding more natural. Whether this aspect will continue to be attended to by the learners I cannot say, but I was certainly thrilled whenever I heard it. In addition, attention to the phrasing did reinforce the idea that language is not about one word–one meaning, but rather that words belonged in *communities*, so to speak, that have their own rhythm.

As a result of this research, I now question the wisdom of setting accuracy of grammar as an indicator of progress so early in the language learning process. I think I would simply have learners play around with phrase-length groups of words and sounds in the beginner stages, since grammar seems to need its own time to take shape.

The task of repeating by rote some small texts is something easily achievable early in the learning process and gives great opportunity for celebratory points. Since doing this research, I am much more aware of the role of small, achievable units in keeping the learners motivated, and I know this knowledge will be helpful in my future classes.

As a result of my participation in this project, I can clearly see the value of quality resources. Skilled layout and photographs add to the richness of the experience. I also felt that the sensitive use of music was important for providing elements of emotion that contribute to *fleshing out* a learning experience.

In order to excite and motivate commitment to language learning, I recommend that more attention be given to producing materials, for beginners especially, of an extremely high quality and with no explanation of language. While, in principle, the idea of developing texts from the learners' own experiences is good, I found that those I made tended to be uninviting, as can be seen from the following texts:

### **My lounge**

My lounge is a very nice room. It is a big room and it is very sunny. In the room there is a comfortable couch and two new armchairs. There is a TV but there isn't a stereo because the stereo is in the kitchen. On the floor there is a soft carpet.

I love my lounge because I relax in this room.

### **Brimbank Park**

Brimbank Park is a very big park. In the park there are beautiful trees and there is a river. There are long paths for walks beside the river, and there are some BBQs for picnics. Children like this park because it has a lovely playground for them.

### **The Vietnamese Temple**

The Vietnamese Temple is in Sunshine. It is beside Duke Street Reserve. Inside the temple there are many shrines to Buddha and in the shrines there are many offerings of fruit to Buddha. There are also many photographs in the temple, because people want to remember their family members who died.

### **Duke Street Reserve**

This is a small park in Sunshine. In the park there is a long walk down to the River Maribyrnong. There are some gardens with many new plants of native gum trees, but there are also many weeds in this park. They are not good for the park but they have pretty flowers.

I do feel there is a place for outrageous humour in language lessons. A hearty belly laugh does wonders to create a sense of camaraderie and safety, and to lift the energy in a room. Usually, the times I can best get this happening are when I cheat wildly in the scoring of team competitions. If students know that random extra points come with a particularly attractive phrasing, it does a lot to motivate their creativity and accuracy.

It was clear to me that the more effective lessons were those where the printed word was kept to a minimum and total involvement was maximised. The implications here are enormous, and do point to a strong argument in favour of experiential learning, especially in the beginning phases of learning a language. Just as high-quality resources made a difference, so too did the quality of participation in the classroom interactions have an impact on the general climate of the class.

Without doubt, this has been a profound and revealing process for me. The issue of making words matter has raised tremendous awareness of personal issues that I am deeply grateful for and I appreciate having had this opportunity for such reflection. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all who helped me in this process, especially our project coordinators and my colleagues. My special thanks go to the learners in my class for their support and willingness to be party to my investigations.

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# SECTION FOUR

## *Working with idioms*

### **1 *Fair dinkum or a rip-off?: learning Australian idioms***

Jill Schaefer

### **2 *Exploring idiom usage***

Sandra Auld

### **3 *Teaching idioms to pre-intermediate language learners***

Margaret Davis

## Introduction

Learners of English cannot avoid dealing with idiomatic language as part of the learning process because idioms are so much a part of the spoken and written language. Conversations in all social settings are peppered with idioms, as are common written texts such as newspaper headlines and stories. Through idioms, students are presented with the shared cultural understandings of English speakers. They are also presented with the history of the language as the literal meanings of the past have taken on metaphorical meanings as culture has shifted. Few of us now *plough* fields, but we *plough money into a business*, *plough through a novel* or *plough on with our work* (Wright 1999:9).

The fixed nature of idioms makes them easy to remember, but their metaphorical meanings make them difficult for students to understand and to use appropriately. This is the challenge that the three teachers in this section took on as part of their project. They were concerned with helping students to understand the role of idioms in contemporary language and to develop strategies for learning and dealing with idioms.

Jill Schaefer, a teacher in the ACT, decided to use the puzzle pages of the newspaper to develop student understanding of Australian idiomatic language. She was also interested in encouraging her students to take responsibility for their own vocabulary development. Through focusing on this aspect of language, her students were made more aware of expressions they heard outside the classroom.

In Queensland, Sandra Auld chose to focus on idioms as this was a priority with her CSWE III/IV class. She decided to ask the students to log new idioms encountered each week and she also introduced a range of idiom-building exercises into classwork. In a final evaluation, some students were able to identify situations where they encountered and used idioms. Other students were able to identify why they did not use idioms. Overall, Sandra found that the idiom repertoire of her students increased, as did their confidence in using idiomatic expressions.

Margaret Davis, who works with AMES Victoria, decided to focus on more transparent idioms at first and then to move on to more difficult ones. She also tried to find commonality across different cultures in the use of idioms. Over the course of the project she had two classes of different levels. The higher level class was able to deal with idiomatic language more competently and some of these students were able to use idioms appropriately in classwork. This focus on idioms led her students to be less reliant on dictionaries and more able to explain how they came to terms with idiomatic language.

Hopefully, the reports of these teachers will encourage others to take the plunge into this difficult area of language teaching and learning.

## Reference

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# **1 Fair dinkum or a rip-off?: learning Australian idioms**

**Jill Schaefer**

## **Background**

The opportunity to participate in action research on vocabulary raised a number of questions:

- How exactly do we define vocabulary?
- Is it just a collection of words?
- How do teachers assess student vocabulary?
- Should assessment be based on the words that students recognise in reading and listening, words they can translate into their own language or words they actually use in speaking and writing?
- Is it enough to know one meaning for a vocabulary item or should the different inflections of the word also be known?
- Is correct spelling essential?
- Just what is the role of vocabulary in developing the language competence of our language learners?

AMEP teachers are busy teaching grammar and preparing their students for the CSWE competencies, which do not specifically address vocabulary. Consequently they sometimes overlook vocabulary. This project encouraged teachers to focus and reflect on the role of vocabulary in their teaching.

As teachers, we have to balance vocabulary with the other language skills. When teaching beginning students, teachers can provide graded vocabulary but interested students will soon forge ahead. One of the aims of most teachers is to encourage learners to take responsibility for developing their own vocabulary.

## **The research setting**

At the time of the project, the students were enrolled full-time (four days per week) in the AMEP in the Australian Capital Territory. Most were in their second semester of study in the CSWE II B stream, having completed CSWE I in the first semester. Most of the students were young, with ages ranging from 20 to 35 years. They were tertiary educated and well motivated. Most were married, about one-third to Australians, and about one-third had children. Only one or two had part-time employment. There were several Chinese students, but the rest came from Poland, Thailand, Russia, Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Burma, Vietnam and Romania. I taught the class for two days each week.

## **Purpose**

I was particularly interested in looking at ways to encourage the students to develop vocabulary learning strategies out of the classroom. I decided to use the *fun and games* page of the *Sunday Canberra Times* to introduce the students to a variety of word games. In the end, I decided to concentrate on introducing the students to the Australian

idioms in a find-a-word puzzle because they had shown a great interest in understanding the Australian expressions that they had come across in reading and listening exercises.

The words are presented in a 15 x 15 space find-a-word in the newspaper and I developed supplementary worksheets. Students were also encouraged to do the other games out of class (answers were provided at the bottom of the worksheet so that they could self-correct). Student attention was also drawn to similar word puzzles in the free local paper and in various children's books. In addition, using *Puzzlemaker* ([www.puzzlemaker.com](http://www.puzzlemaker.com)), I produced a number of find-a-word puzzles on various topics such as the Olympic Games, grammar points (for example, past participles) and on the vocabulary from each chapter in the student workbook (*Headway Pre-Intermediate*).

## The study

The students were presented with eight Aussie find-a-word puzzles over the term. Each contained about 30 words or phrases (eg *back of beyond*), including place names. Many words recurred, so this provided revision and a chance for me to see whether students remembered the words.

In a typical session, the students were presented with the list of words to be found. They were given a short time to look through them and then we quickly went through the meanings of the words. The meanings were generally written on the board and students were encouraged to provide synonyms, so the exercise went beyond just looking at the Australian words. The students were then given supplementary exercises that were done in class (see sample worksheets opposite). These focused on the new words or expressions that I considered most important. The students who finished first would make a start on the puzzle in class but it was often finished at home.

The supplementary exercises usually involved matching meanings and using the correct word in a sentence. It was obvious that some students were familiar with idiomatic Australian English, but others had only heard or read a few of the Australian words. Even those who recognised some words often had no idea of how to spell them.

This basic format continued throughout the study, and as the study progressed I made notes of student reactions and any examples of their use of the words. My colleagues were interested and supportive, and would often contribute ideas and suggest further examples.

Early in Term 4, I asked the class to fill in a survey sheet (see page 116) and gave them a test. Unfortunately, the class composition had changed over the semester and only the ten students who had attended the majority of sessions completed the survey.

## Findings

According to comments in class, all of the students enjoyed the work on the *fun and games* page, especially learning new Australian vocabulary. They also felt that they had learned more about Australian culture. On the day of the survey a new student arrived, so while the others did the survey, I gave him a *fun and games* sheet. He found it very exciting and wanted all the new words explained to him. Some said that they found the *Oz words*, as we called them, very difficult.

The survey asked students if the *fun and games* pages had helped them learn new words. Seven out of ten said yes (one said yes with an exclamation mark).

**Sample worksheet 1**

**MORE OZ WORDS**

You have already met the asterisked (\*) words. Can you remember them?  
Match the words *without* asterisks to the meanings below.

Adelaide	*	Do your block	*
Anzus	*	Drongo	
Back blocks		Happy as Larry	*
Back of beyond	*	Kacky-handed	*
Bandicoot		Lake Pedder	
Barrack	*	Lucky country	*
Blowfly	*	Paddock	
Bog in	*	Ridgy didge	
Chiack	*	Stickybeak	
Cobber		Stirrer	*
Colliwobbles	*	Stubby	*
Crack hardy		Tuckerbox	*
Coonawarra		Wagga Wagga	*

field	outer suburbs	friend, mate	idiot
remote lake in SW Tasmania, centre of wilderness controversy			
someone who pokes their nose into someone else's business, an inquisitive person			
a wine-growing area in Australia	to pretend to be brave	rat-like Australian marsupial	dinky-di, dinkum, true blue, genuine

**Sample worksheet 2**

Complete the following sentences with one of the new words.

- 1 He met his \_\_\_\_\_ s in the pub for a drink.
- 2 After living in Paris, she really thought we lived in the \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3 The farmer planted wheat in his \_\_\_\_\_ s.
- 4 While bushwalking near \_\_\_\_\_ in Tasmania, I saw a tiny \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_.
- 6 My neighbour is such a \_\_\_\_\_. She's always looking over the fence to see what the children are doing.
- 7 He tried to \_\_\_\_\_ after the accident but I could see he was really in great pain.
- 8 What a \_\_\_\_\_! He's always doing stupid things.
- 9 Every \_\_\_\_\_ Australian enjoys *Vegemite*.
- 10 Last autumn he picked grapes in \_\_\_\_\_.

### Learning vocabulary

Please read and answer the following questions carefully.

Add extra comments or information if you wish.

- 1 Have the 'fun and games' pages from the *Canberra Times* helped you learn new words?
- 2 Which word games do you find most useful?
- 3 Have you used any *English word games* out of class? If yes, which ones?
  - Find-a-word/wonderword/wordfinder
  - crosswords
  - stepwords
  - Scrabble
  - other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 What other ways do you learn *new words* out of class?
  - read books or newspapers
  - talk to people
  - use a bilingual dictionary
  - watch TV or listen to the radio (which programs?)
  - use the Internet (how?)
  - other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - make list of words you see or hear
- 5 How do you learn *new words* in class?
  - write them down with translations
  - do exercises
  - understand from the context
  - use programs like *Interactive Picture Dictionary* and *Issues in English*
  - revise the lists in your textbook
  - do dictations
- 6 When do you think you have really learned a new word?
  - when you first meet it
  - when you write it down
  - when you understand it in reading
  - when you recognise it when someone else uses it
  - when you use it in writing
  - when you can translate it from/into your language
  - when you use it in speaking
- 7 Write down any Oz words you can remember.  
\_\_\_\_\_

Most students (7 out of 10) claimed to be using word games as one of their out-of-class strategies. Find-a-words were popular, as were crosswords and stepwords. Some students were very quick at working through the puzzles, while others found them quite difficult. From discussions with the students, this appeared to reflect the extent of their familiarity with such puzzles. Perhaps it also reflected student ability to see words as a whole. It is likely that visual learners would be good at finding words.

They used a variety of other out-of-class strategies including books, magazines, newspapers, TV (news and programs such as *Who wants to be a Millionaire?* and *Our House*), talking and making lists of words. I observed the usefulness of their pocket vocabulary notebooks when the class went on an excursion to applaud the Olympic athletes. Out came the notebooks to collect autographs. Will the students remember

who Jai Taurima and Michael Klim are or will they be frustrated when, later, they try to find these words in their electronic dictionaries?

The students ticked most of the suggested in-class strategies except for *revise the lists in your textbook*. This suggested that, as class teachers, we had been a bit remiss with the textbook.

*When do you think you have really learned a new word?* elicited a number of responses that included being able to translate it and recognise and use it. One student provided the rather unexpected response of *1999!*

When asked to recall Oz words, the students gave a limited response. Among the words were: *mate, g'day, aussie, bullshit, bulldust, brumby, tinny, Akubra, have a go, galah, apple isle, boomerang, bush*. They mainly remembered those from the most recent games page. I was not expecting dozens of words but did expect a few more. Misspellings aside, some of the words identified had never appeared in their puzzles although we had met them elsewhere in class activities.

I followed up the survey with an unannounced quiz (see page 118). The first part asked the students to classify words according to three headings — towns, food and animals. I deliberately put all words into upper case to make sure students did not benefit from having towns with an upper-case first letter. This exercise was not done very well. I was surprised that the students had so much trouble identifying the towns in the classification exercise. This reminded me that it is easy to take things for granted and assume that place names are easy to identify, even without the clue of a first capital letter. On other occasions, I have observed how much trouble students have had identifying first and family names, and how, when this occurred, students could be distracted from the real meaning of a text.

In the second section, students had to match 25 Oz words with a more common word. This exercise was handled more successfully by the students. The context obviously helped, but it also showed that the students had developed an understanding of the vocabulary.

There was little evidence of the use of these words in the students' writing or speaking, although one student proudly told me about her trip to the local trash and treasure market, where she had told the merchant that his asking price was a *rip-off*. I also observed some students trying some idioms with the conversation tutors.

This finding was not surprising since the very nature of the vocabulary makes it more suitable for recognition than for production by our students. I was mindful of comments such as: *I would like teacher tell me which vocabulary we can remember because if unusual we don't want to remember. And firstly I want to know common words and when I get better I want to know uncommon* (Burns and de Silva Joyce 2000:16). However, I felt that these students had progressed beyond common words. Nonetheless, the students had been frequently told that they were expected to recognise these words rather than write or say them.

The introduction of these Oz words encouraged students to ask about other Australian expressions they had heard outside the classroom. Sometimes we could not work out what they meant, but generally we got there. The students were continually amazed at the difference between the way phrases sound and the spelling of the isolated words in them.

Negatives and positives came out of dictionary work connected with Oz words. The students were often frustrated when they could not find the words in their bilingual and electronic dictionaries. However, they were encouraged to look in the large *Macquarie dictionary* where they almost invariably found a definition and often a picture too.

**Student test**

**OZ WORDS — Can you remember them?**

A Look at the following words. Place them in their correct box. There are five words for each box.

TUCKER BRUMBY ADELAIDE GALAH BANDICOOT BROOME HOBART  
SANGER TINNY GEELONG CAIRNS BUNYIP DAMPER CRAY

Australian towns	Birds or animals	Food or drink

B Read the following story. Match the underlined Oz words with one of the words from the box. Write its number in the brackets. Don't use any number more than once.

**A DINKI-DI ( ) AUSSIE ( ) BARBIE ( )**

I live out the back of beyond ( ). Last weekend we had a barbie in the paddock ( ). My mate ( ) Ian brought his esky ( ) full of cold tinny's ( ). We served the usual tucker ( ) – chops ( ), bangers a few yabbies ( ) from the dam, dampers ( ) and salad. Paul, my kacky-handed ( ) cobber ( ) did the cooking. He wore his Akubra ( ) to keep off the sun and the blowies ( ) and drank from a stubby ( ).

When the food was ready he yelled, 'Bog in ( )', and everybody started eating. Our English friend looked at the food suspiciously. Paul said, 'Have a go ( )', but she said, 'Have you got any sangers ( )? I dunno about that stuff'.

After eating, the kids put on their bathers ( ) and had a swim in the dam. They were all as happy as Larry ( ).

Some of the adults drank too much. Paul was blotto ( ) so I said, 'You silly galah ( ), you'd better stay in the sleepout tonight. Only a drongo ( ) drinks and drives'.

1. idiot (bird too)	2. stupid person	3. Australian	4. ice-box
5. very happy	6. very drunk	7. lamb cutlets	8. swimming costume
9. sandwiches	10. try	11. prawn-like creatures	12. blowflies
13. small bottle of beer	14. cans of beer	15. start eating	16. friend
17. left-handed	18. type of hat	19. food	20. friend
21. field	22. genuine	23. in the country	24. barbecue
25. type of bread			



## 2 Exploring idiom usage

Sandra Auld

### The class

The class chosen for the action research project in Term 4, 2000 was a mixed CSWE III and CSWE IV class. The majority of the students were studying CSWE IV, as can be seen from the following profile.

	Age	Sex	Country of birth	Time in Australia	Educa-tion	Previous work	ASLPR	CSWE level	Class type
S1	40	F	Japan	11 yrs	14 yrs	HR Trainer	2+	IV	TIC
S2	37	F	China	1 yr	11 yrs	Nurse	2	IV	TIC
S3	45	F	Sth Korea	9 yrs	15 yrs	Nurse	2	IV	TIC
S4	55	F	India	27 yrs	5 yrs		2+/1+	III	TIC
S5	26	F	Thailand	2 yrs	16 yrs	Secretary	2/1+	III	AMEP
S6	44	F	Chile	16 yrs	12 yrs	Student	2+	IV	TIC
S7	57	F	Indonesia	3 yrs		Business	2+/3	IV	TIC
S8	31	F	Hungary	2 mths	14 yrs	Int Design	2/1+	III	TIC
S9	58	F	Argentina		Tertiary	Nun	2+/3	IV	TIC
S10		M	Yugoslavia			Trade?	3	IV	TIC
S11	30	M	Indonesia	2 yrs	12 yrs	Com Work	2	III	AMEP
S12	44	F	Taiwan	6 mths	16 yrs	Accountant	1+	III	AMEP

The class profile identifies the data for the 12 students who did the initial survey in Week 6. Only between one-half and two-thirds were involved in the follow-up activities in the project.

Some CSWE III AMEP students had elected to enrol in this class rather than in a homogeneous CSWE III class because this class offered a computer component taught by a computer teacher. This component was offered one morning a week for two hours. The 13 hours of English were delivered over an additional three days. I had taught most of the students in this class previously.

### Why idiom?

In previous needs analyses of the CSWE III/IV class, idiom had emerged as a priority. Teaching idiom has always been a somewhat thorny and complex area of vocabulary development. However, it seemed an appropriate focus at this time because it was pertinent to both the needs of the class and to the action research project.

To develop some background on the topic, I read a range of articles on current trends and different aspects of vocabulary teaching and learning. These aspects included comprehension and production (Carter and McCarthy 1988), the description, acquisition and pedagogy of vocabulary (Schmitt and McCarthy 1997),





- Draw a diagram or picture to help remember the meaning.
- Associate a picture or diagram in a book or worksheet with the idiom.
- Write a sentence with the idiom in it.
- Find out the opposite meaning of the idiom (if appropriate), eg **to get along** vs **to get on each other's nerves** ...
- Just learn the idiomatic expression by itself.

Any other strategies? \_\_\_\_\_

Any other comments? \_\_\_\_\_

Having analysed the survey results, I attended an NCELTR Project day with Anne Burns and Stephanie Claire and my other Queensland colleagues on the project. Bearing in mind my original project questions on idioms, I decided on a two-pronged approach:

- 1 I would formulate a log for the students to annotate each week examples of new idioms encountered.
- 2 I would expose the students to a range of idiom-building exercises and activities in class to help them clarify effective idiom-learning strategies.

The following log enabled those students whose contact with idioms was restricted to the classroom to extend their opportunities.

### Idiom log — Homework

Try to collect examples of idioms for next week. Some suggestions of sources:

- books/readers
- newspapers, including local ones
- magazine articles
- advertisements (all media)
- radio programs, eg radio talkback — *Australia Talks Back*
- TV news
- TV current affairs, eg *Extra*, *7.30 Report*
- TV soap operas, eg *Something in the Air*, *Home and Away*
- TV documentaries, eg *Australian Story*
- TV travel, eg *Getaway*
- casual conversations.

#### Idiom examples

1 \_\_\_\_\_

Where did you find/hear it?

Who said it/wrote it?

What was the context? (situation)

What does it mean?

2 \_\_\_\_\_

Where did you find/hear it?

Who said it/wrote it?

What was the context? (situation)

What does it mean?



### Evaluation form — Certificates III and IV

*Thank you for taking part in the Idiom Project this term.  
Can you complete the following evaluation on the project?*

#### Idiom — Awareness

- 1 Do you recognise idioms more now?  Yes  No Why/Why not?  
2 Do you know more idioms now?  Yes  No Why/Why not?

#### Idiom — Usage

Do you use idioms more now?  Yes  No Why/Why not?

#### Idiom — Understanding

- 1 Are you understanding idioms better?  Yes  No Why/Why not?  
2 Were the idiom homework exercises each week useful?  Yes  No Why/Why not?  
3 Was it useful to share the idioms you found each week?  Yes  No Why/Why not?  
4 Did you use the ESL idiom sites on the Internet?  Yes  No

If yes, were some useful/not useful? \_\_\_\_\_

Give a reason \_\_\_\_\_

#### Idiom — Class activities

Which exercises in class on idiom did you find most helpful?  
(Rank order them from 1–6, 1 being the most helpful)

- listening to idioms in Australian casual conversations
- reading idioms in Australian casual conversations
- matching lists of idioms (on the topic) and their meanings
- matching idioms in a written casual conversation with their meanings in another rewritten version of the same conversation
- putting the appropriate idiom in a gap in a sentence
- reading about a situation in which an idiom is used and then identifying if it's correctly or incorrectly used

#### Idioms — Strategies

- 1 Do you remember idioms when you learn them in class?  Yes  No  
2 What strategies do you use for remembering idioms?

Any other comments? \_\_\_\_\_

## Analysis of results

Analysis of the initial survey showed that 11 of the 12 participants could provide examples of idiom (with varying degrees of accuracy).

In the usage section of the survey, the most common context for encountering idioms was in conversation with friends, in casual conversations and in social situations. This context was followed by the ESL classroom and TV, followed by shopping and newspapers. Five students used idioms and seven did not. The number of students who did not use idioms was surprising to me, given their ability to provide examples reasonably accurately.

When asked in what situations they would use idioms, three students answered that they used them in social situations and two answered with friends. When asked who they used them with, idioms were used mostly with friends or other students. One student used them with neighbours and one used them with members of the family. Five students replied that they made mistakes when using idioms and one replied they did not.

When asked why they did not use idioms, the answers clustered around four main difficulties:

- 1 Memorising idioms:  
*Because is really difficult to memorise.*  
*Because I forget them.*
- 2 Using idioms correctly:  
*I wish I could use correctly. I like to learn properly.*
- 3 Knowing the appropriate context in which to use idioms:  
*... what situations I have to use it.*  
*Looking for situation and what is the contact [context] in conversation.*
- 4 Familiarity with partner in conversation:  
*Sometimes I don't know very well my talking partner.*

In the strategy section of the evaluation, strategies were divided into understanding and learning. It appears that, in order to understand idioms, the majority of students either asked someone what they meant or looked for clues in the context. The following table presents the learning strategies in order of popularity:

Learning strategies	
• write a sentence with it	7
• write it down in a list	5
• associate it with similar words in other expressions	4
• associate with image or mental picture	4
• associate with similar expression in my language	4
• just learn the idiom	4
• associate with picture or diagram in book or worksheet with idiom	3
• remember idiom by its grammar	2
• draw a diagram or picture	1

For learning idioms, the strategies preferred, in order of priority, were as follows:

Learning styles	
• see it both written down and said	10
• hear it aurally	3
• see it written down	0

Students participated in the homework log-keeping exercise for four weeks, collecting idiom examples, citing sources and contexts, and explaining the meaning. Most students collected two to three idioms each week and cited the source. Most attempted to identify the context and successfully explained the meaning. The sources

for the idioms collected (suggestions having been provided each week with the log) ranged from different media sources (electronic and print) to books (fiction, non-fiction, children's books) and magazines (women's, house design, theological) to conversations with friends, neighbours and relatives.

After having tracked the variety of idiom sources, it was interesting to note that all utilised a variety of sources. Two students had native-born Australian husbands and quoted their mother-in-laws as idiom sources (eg a mother-in-law while playing cards with her daughter: *no flies on her*, and a mother-in-law discussing her other daughter-in-law: *up to her eyes*). Three of the students used their children or their children's books as sources. One student also regularly used her elderly neighbour as an idiom source. Six of the students used newspapers (local and State), while three used the Internet for ESL idiom sites, for which addresses were supplied in class. Only one student used the radio (a commercial station) regularly.

Each week in class, before the homework logs were collected, the students reported back to their group on the idioms collected. They listed them all on an overhead transparency for reporting to the rest of the class. Such reporting sessions provided an opportunity for teaching oral reporting skills.

One idiom collected in Week 1, *green-eyed monster*, sparked further discussion of *green fingers* and *apple of her father's eye*. This, in turn, led to the origin of *apple* in the idiom and to a discussion of the word *nine* in *on cloud nine*.

Discussion on learning strategies for idiom retention included visualisations for remembering the idiom *flat out* through an image of a person on a floor, and the idiom *bug-eyed* through an image of an insect full of food. The idiom *a real pain* led to discussion of similar expressions in first languages, with one student translating the idiom *a chip on his shoulder* into the Hungarian equivalent: *he has a hump on his back*.

The evaluation form completed in the last week of the project was completed by six students. In the original survey completed in Week 1, four of the students had responded that they did not use idioms. In the evaluation form they now stated that they did, although another student stated, *'I haven't any opportunity to use idioms'*. All six respondents stated that they recognised idioms and that they understood idioms better. All six found the homework log useful, eg *'I learned some idioms from real life — for example, from conversations, newspapers, magazines and TV reports'*. One student stated, *'It helps me to recognise more idiom'*, and another noted, *'Because I have to founded it or listening from somewhere'*.

It appears that the process of tracking idioms and using a variety of sources was a useful one for gaining idiom awareness, recognition and understanding. Five of the six students found the process of sharing idioms each week useful:

*'We share our experience and help we to understand better the person who explained it.'*

*'Everybody had different review and knowledge.'*

*'Also it was made a new way to know and share the idiom.'*

One of these five students found it too much of an overload: *'I couldn't remember because it was too much for me'*. Only two of the students said they used the Internet for idiom collection, and one of those noted that it was not useful: *'Because I hear from everyday life, it's better than on the Internet'*.

The question on the evaluation form seeking feedback on class idiom activities indicated that the three most useful activities, in order of preference, were as follows:

- 1 putting the appropriate idiom in a gap in a sentence
- 2 listening to idioms in Australian casual conversations
- 3 matching lists of idioms (on the topic) and their meanings.

Of the six students, three said they remembered idioms in class, two did not and one did not answer.

The most common strategy used by the students for memorising was writing the idiom down, accompanied by saying it and composing a sentence with it. Other strategies included using idioms in casual conversation and matching the idiom with a similar one in L1. These responses indicated that there was no real change in learning strategies from those identified in the initial survey.

## Reflections

The project increased the idiom repertoire of those students who participated to the end. Their involvement each week in searching for idioms, recording them, examining their contexts and determining their meaning, followed by the reporting back in class, contributed to an overall increase in their confidence in using idioms outside the classroom. This may explain the apparent contradiction initially between student idiom knowledge and their reluctance to use them. Certainly, the interaction outside the classroom with friends, neighbours and mother-in-laws helped consolidate oral discussion centred on idioms, although the bulk of the idioms collected over the four weeks came from more passive sources, which involved reading or listening.

Hopefully, the confidence arising from increased exposure to and knowledge of idioms, as well as the variety of idiom-building exercises and activities undertaken in class, contributed to overcoming some of the barriers to utilising idiom, as seen in the results of the initial survey. Certainly, all six of the respondents who remained with the project said they now used idiom, including four of those who originally said they did not.

I found involvement in the project a very useful form of personal development as it made me confront the 'whys and wherefores' of my vocabulary teaching. It also enhanced my practice through exposure to the vocabulary-teaching approaches and processes of the other teachers in the project. Participation in such a project can only benefit student language acquisition through the enhanced awareness of their teachers.

The final comment comes from a thank-you card from the class. It was composed by the reluctant participant in the project who ended up contributing enthusiastically each week and answering positively each evaluation question.

*We tried to wrap up our THANKS. You can't turn them down.  
We hope that every Monday's report about idioms came up roses  
for you. During the time ahead we will be underway with our English.  
Anyway this is a Thanks a million to you!*

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### **3 Teaching idioms to pre-intermediate language learners**

**Margaret Davis**

#### **Background**

I began the project at the end of July 2000. At this time I was working with a CSWE II class that was predominantly composed of Mandarin speakers. There were also four non-Chinese speakers who were from Cambodia, Egypt, India and the Sudan. This was quite a disparate group with regard to learning skills and educational backgrounds.

For Term 4, I was assigned to a higher-level CSWE II group, and the students were much more homogeneous in their learning levels and abilities. The 22 students in this class were from 11 different countries and spoke ten different languages.

For the action research project, we were asked to select an aspect of vocabulary teaching that was of interest to us. In the past I had worked with many high-level students (CSWE III and IV) who had stated how difficult it was to learn the local language. They also stressed the importance of being introduced to, and being taught, idiomatic expressions.

Idioms are fixed forms of language. They consist of more than one word but they are grammatically not the same as compound expressions. All languages contain idioms, and if English idioms can be linked to a similar concept in a student's first language, then the meaning is more obvious. The use of animals, colours or objects of comparison in idioms is common in a variety of languages, but care must be taken that the cultural associations are also the same.

For Term 3, prior to knowing about this project, I had requested a lower certificate level class. When I became involved in this research, I thought it would be interesting to explore idioms with lower-level students. The class was definitely a low group, but they were also slow paced, and addressing the requirements of the competency-based course was quite a challenge. I will briefly discuss the limited activities that I undertook with this class on idioms and then I will focus on the work that I did with the higher CSWE II class in Term 4.

#### **The project**

##### **The lower-level class**

The text *Idioms for everyday use* (Broukal 1994) was my main reference source. When I began the research, I decided to commence with idioms based on colours. I thought that presenting the expressions in the context of a story would assist student understanding. However, this proved very difficult for the students, even when the lesson was followed up immediately with group conversation with volunteer tutors, who attempted to do some more thorough explanations of the terms. I decided to inform the students of my involvement in this project and utilised the services of a bilingual information officer to talk to the Chinese-speaking class members, while I spoke to the others.

In subsequent lessons, I introduced just one or two idioms, especially those that I felt were more transparent in meaning, such as *the black market*, *to feel blue* and *in black and white*. These were introduced in context and were appropriate to the topics being addressed. The meanings were discussed. Students were always keen to copy down the idioms and their meanings, and they referred back to them when they recurred in lessons. However, the students' language levels were not sufficient for them to reproduce any of these new expressions.

### The higher-level class

For the second part of the project, I had a higher-level CSWE II class that seemed much more receptive to the concept of idioms. The students were enthusiastic in their approach to learning new vocabulary. We discussed the use of idioms in all languages, and the students were given the opportunity to translate common idiomatic expressions from their mother tongue. They openly admitted that idioms were very difficult, but nevertheless they were keen to learn about the local language that they were exposed to in their daily lives in Australia.

With this class, I attempted two methods of teaching idioms:

- 1 I presented the expressions in a multi-form approach by using texts such as *Idioms for everyday use* (Broukal 1994) and *Understanding everyday Australian Book 1* (Boyer 1998).
- 2 I worked with individual expressions as they arose in newspaper articles, narratives or listening passages.

With both methods, the new expressions were nearly always introduced in context. However, they were isolated when presented in listening activities. For example, when listening to the ABC program *Behind the News*, the students were not given the script, but were asked to listen for specific information. When an idiomatic expression occurred, the tape was replayed and students were asked to identify the expression. It was then written on the board and its meaning was discussed.

Various strategies were used to reinforce the understanding and retention of new idioms, including matching activities, cloze activities where students had to provide the correct word order and activities where they had to use the new language correctly in written form and in context. Students were also asked to provide written explanations for the more common or transparent idioms.

### Outcomes

As discussed, the first class did not have a sufficient command of the English language to cope with idioms and I did not have much project time with this group. Therefore, the visible outcomes were extremely limited. However, the second group displayed more positive results over an eight-week period, even though they were still low-level learners.

The second group definitely coped better when the new expressions were not introduced in a multi-form. This method seemed to be daunting and many students seemed overwhelmed when faced with numerous words that they could not use their dictionaries to translate. When the same expressions were presented on their own, but in context, the students were more capable of working out the meanings.

I reinforced the importance of not trying to use idioms, in either verbal or written form, until they occurred naturally. However, several students correctly included some of the new idiomatic expressions in their writing. For example, when writing about a

special occasion, one student wrote that her friend was *dressed to kill* and another said she was *in seventh heaven*. Students were not encouraged to use idioms in their writing, so it was pleasing to see that some understood them sufficiently well and felt confident enough to include them.

Most students were able to match the idioms and their meanings, and it was pleasing to hear some explaining meanings to other students. A major outcome was that many students were able to let go of their dictionaries and attempted to work out new terms when they appeared in context. This came about through frequent exposure to complex idiomatic expressions. Students were also encouraged not to reach automatically for their dictionaries, but to try and work out the meaning of new words and phrases.

Another pleasing outcome from this project was student interest in understanding and learning new idioms. My class had one hour per week in the computer room, and one week I introduced them to a program called *Idioms*, which was produced by Kangan Batman TAFE. This provided opportunities for students to listen to and work with 20 different idiomatic expressions. Many students returned to the program when they had completed their set tasks.

## Conclusion

The higher-level group showed definite progress with this aspect of vocabulary development. Idioms introduced in class included: *a piece of cake*, *forty winks*, *out of the blue*, *once in a blue moon*, *to pull someone's leg*, *to be second to none*, *to hit the roof*, *to have a sweet tooth*, *to rain cats and dogs*, *red tape*, *over the hill*, *under the weather*, *dirt cheap*, *to work like a dog*, *a jack of all trades*, *a pain in the neck*. Although it still remains a challenging area to teach and learn, the students have displayed excellent word attack strategies for determining the meanings of these usually confusing terms.

In an oral evaluation of the research project, the students were asked to comment on the ways they understood and retained idiomatic expressions. Their responses, in relation to specific idiomatic expressions, are outlined in the following table.

Idioms	Student explanations
To cost an arm and a leg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the word cost is included, plus two long parts of the body, which means it must be a lot</li> </ul>
To be in seventh heaven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>heaven represents a happy place</li> </ul>
To go bananas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sounds like something wild</li> </ul>
Six of one, half a dozen of the other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>both six and half a dozen are the same</li> </ul>
Any Tom, Dick or Harry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>just anyone</li> </ul>
To eat like a horse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a horse is big and it would eat a lot</li> </ul>

This was an interesting project as it made me more aware of the degree to which idioms are used in everyday language. It was also interesting to observe how some students coped without relying on their dictionaries. Hopefully, it helped the students to realise that there are numerous strategies and skills that they can utilise when working with new or difficult vocabulary, such as idioms.

