

Content-Based Language Learning and the Teaching of Vocabulary

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Many people who have studied foreign languages recall memorizing lists of vocabulary words, studying grammar rules, and then plugging the words into the grammatical patterns, with little regard for the meaning of the sentences they were producing. Over the past few decades the language teaching profession has been slowly moving away from this grammar-translation model of teaching toward a more communicative approach. The underlying theory for this movement is the notion that language is a tool for communication, and is therefore best learned by using it to interpret and convey real information in the target language.

If students are to use language for communicating meaningful messages, it follows that language learning must involve meaningful content. If students are to listen, read, speak, and write in the language, they must listen to, read, speak and write about *something*. This need for meaningful content has given rise to *content-based language learning*.

Content-Based Language Learning

In content-based language learning, students learn language by using it as a tool to study subject matter. Content-based models come in a variety of forms. Perhaps the most well-known model is *immersion*, in which students (usually at the elementary school level) study math, science, social studies, and other subjects in the target language, thereby learning academic content and language at the same time. Another content-based model, common in ESL programs, is *sheltered instruction*, in which academic courses in the target language are tailored specifically for groups of second language learners, who are thus “sheltered” from having to compete with native speakers in their classes. A content-based model sometimes found at the university level is the *adjunct model*, in which students concurrently enroll in an academic course taught in the foreign language (such as Latin American History) and a special language course that helps reinforce the academic content. The two courses are carefully coordinated or “adjuncted” with each other (Snow, 2001).

In foreign language classrooms at the secondary school level, the most common content-based model is *theme-based instruction*. Nearly all major foreign language textbooks are now structured, at least in part, around specific themes. For example, one chapter or unit may deal with food, while others may address the family, leisure activities, sports, music, art, travel, or other themes. Another type of theme-based organization involves devoting one or more chapters to each of the countries or regions in which the target language is spoken. The best theme-based textbooks provide for the integration of content learning and language learning; for example, a unit discussing cultural changes over the past 30 years could incorporate a focus on the imperfect tense to describe how society used to be when the students’ parents were teenagers.

Vocabulary Teaching in Theme-Based Instruction

In theme-based textbooks, vocabulary words are presented in theme-related clusters, such as foods, family members, sports, or professions. Although the words are grouped by theme, it remains the responsibility of the teacher to introduce these words in a way that contextualizes them in relation to the theme, and that helps students learn their meaning and pronunciation.

Before proposing a technique for teaching theme-based vocabulary, let us consider how *not* to teach it. We have seen many teachers who simply pronounce each word on the list and have students engage in choral repetition of the word: “*Casa*. House. *Casa*. *Clase*, *repitan*. *Casa*. *Casa*.” What is wrong with this technique? In our opinion, such teaching does little to situate the new words in the context of the theme or to relate them to students’ background knowledge.

A cognitive approach to language teaching stipulates that in order for learning to be meaningful, students must be able to relate it to their previous knowledge, and choral repetition by itself does nothing to facilitate the formation of such mental relationships. A second weakness of the technique – and perhaps a more serious one – is that hearing students repeat long lists of words may give the teacher a false impression that the words are being internalized, when in fact nothing of the sort may be occurring.

While some teachers may argue that students will ultimately have to learn vocabulary words on their own, we believe that the teacher can go a long way toward helping students internalize vocabulary items by introducing them in the context of the theme.

Introducing New Vocabulary

What, then, should the teacher do when confronted with a list of theme-based vocabulary words to teach? Consider the following example in which the teacher is introducing the word *mochila*:

Ésta es una mochila. [holds up a backpack] ¿Es una mochila verde o azul? ¿es una mochila grande o pequeña? ¿es la mochila de Brandon, o la mochila del profesor? Muchos estudiantes tienen mochilas. ¿Quiénes tienen aquí su mochila? Megan, ¿tienes libros en tu mochila? ¿Muchos libros? ¿Es muy pesada [demonstrates] tu mochila? ¡Ay, qué mochila tan pesada!

We have found this technique to be effective in contextualizing new words and relating them to students' knowledge. The technique is based on three principles:

- Use the word in real-life contexts related to students' experience.
- Ask simple questions using the word.
- Get in as many repetitions of the word as possible.

Each of these principles is discussed below, followed by several more illustrations.

Use the new word in real-life contexts related to students' experience. In preparation for a vocabulary lesson, teachers should ask themselves, "What types of familiar contexts is this word used in?" For the word *montañas*, for example, the teacher might mention the names of well-known mountains, or discuss the types of activities that can be done in the mountains. For a verb such as *esquiar*, a comparison could be made between snow skiing and water skiing.

Taylor and Luckau (1996) offer a number of helpful suggestions for contextualizing vocabulary. For nouns, the teacher can show the actual object or a picture of it, or draw it on the board. Alternatively, well-known examples of the noun can be given: "Colgate o Aim son marcas muy conocidas de *pasta dental*". "México y Canadá son *países*". "Chicago y Portland son *ciudades*". For verbs, the action may be demonstrated through "uninhibited antics such as climbing on your desk [to teach *subir*], crying, shouting, dying, and so on" (p. 6-9). Nearly any part of speech may be taught through antonyms or synonyms: "*Caliente* es el opuesto de *frío*". "*Triste* es lo contrario de *contento*". "*Regresar* es lo mismo que *volver*". Alternatively, the teacher may relate new words to cognates that students understand: "El chico es muy *listo*, es decir, es muy inteligente". "*Quizás* venga mañana; posiblemente venga mañana".

Ask simple questions using the word. In our experience, students tend to pay more attention and become more involved in the lesson if the teacher asks questions rather than just delivering a monologue. For beginners, "yes/no" questions work well. Ray and Seely (2004) suggest that "if the word is a noun, ask if a student likes it. If it is a verb, ask if s/he does it" (p. 36). To teach

libro, for example, the teacher might say, “¿Quién tiene aquí un libro? Fulano, ¿tienes un libro? ¿Es un libro de historia o un libro de ciencia ficción? ¿Te gustan los libros de ciencia ficción?”

Other questions that work well are those that involve well-known examples of the new word. These may be “either/or” questions; for example, to teach *rico*, the teacher might ask: “¿Quién es más rico: Bill Gates o el profesor?” Better yet, the teacher might ask students to come up with examples of famous rich people. Such questions not only help activate students’ background knowledge about the topic, but also allow teachers to assess students’ comprehension without having to ask “¿Qué significa *rico* en inglés?” – or worse still, merely asking “¿Comprenden?”

Get in as many repetitions as possible of the word. For each new word, the teacher should use a combination of the above techniques to repeat the word many times in real-life contexts. (This principle is borrowed from TPR Storytelling – see Ray & Seely, 2004.) Notice that in our *mochila* example, for instance, the word *mochila* was repeated ten times. This repetition helps to solidify both the meaning of the word and its pronunciation in students’ minds.

Following are several more examples of the technique. In the first example, the teacher is showing a PowerPoint presentation with pictures of animals, and is teaching the word *mono*:

Aquí vemos una foto de un mono. Hay varios tamaños de monos: hay monos grandes, hay monos chiquitos . . . ¿A quiénes les gustan los monos? ¿Por qué? Sí, los monos pequeños son muy chistosos. ¿Conocen algún libro o película sobre un mono? ¿Cómo se llama el mono? Ah, Jorge el curioso. ¿Piensan que a sus padres les gustaría tener un mono en casa?

Verbs may be taught in a similar way, with the possible addition of acting out the verb. Following is an example using *cantar*:

A mí me gusta cantar. (sings) “Ay, ay, ay, ay, / Canta y no llores . . . ” ¿A cuántos de Uds. les gusta cantar? ¿Les gusta cantar solos o en grupo? ¿Quiénes cantan en el coro de la escuela? Yo canto en el coro de mi iglesia. ¿Quiénes cantan en la iglesia? Hay muchas personas famosas que cantan. ¿Cuáles son algunas? Sí, Shakira y Enrique Iglesias cantan. ¿Cantan música popular o música clásica?

Even abstract concepts such as *el gobierno* may be taught in this way:

Hay varios niveles en el gobierno. Hay un gobierno local, hay un gobierno del estado, hay un gobierno federal. ¿En qué ciudad están las oficinas del gobierno de nuestro estado? ¿Y el gobierno federal? ¿Quién es el jefe del gobierno federal? ¿Nuestro gobierno es una democracia o una monarquía? ¿Alguien aquí quiere trabajar para el gobierno algún día?

Many teachers assign their students write the new words in a vocabulary notebook, grouped either by theme or by parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.). Alternatively, the teacher may provide a handout with the vocabulary words in Spanish and have students write their English translation as the words are learned. In our experience, it is best to limit vocabulary lessons to 10-15 new words at a time, particularly for beginning students.

Practicing Vocabulary

After new vocabulary is introduced by the teacher, we recommend that it immediately be practiced by students in individual, pair, or small-group activities. At this point, the emphasis is on reinforcing the new words, their meaning, and their pronunciation in students’ minds. This stage could be considered as analogous to the practice phase following the introduction of a new

grammar concept. Although some theorists argue against activities in which the primary focus is on mastering linguistic elements rather than on real-life communicative purposes, we believe there is value in taking time to focus explicitly on reinforcing newly-learned vocabulary: it allows equal attention to be given to each word, increasing the likelihood that students will master its pronunciation and understand its meaning. Rivers (1981) calls this phase *skill getting*, as opposed to *skill using*, in which the focus will later shift to more authentic purposes for using the target language.

Although the focus in this stage is on familiarization with new words, practice activities can and should involve meaningful contexts. Most current textbooks contain contextualized activities designed to provide practice with new vocabulary. The teacher can take advantage of these activities and can supplement them with additional activities such as the following:

- Match vocabulary items with their pictures or definitions. (More advanced students can provide their own definitions.)
- Sort vocabulary items into categories; for example, classroom objects could be sorted into items used by students, items used by the teacher, or both; foods could be sorted into meats, dairy products, fruits and vegetables, and grains.
- Interview a classmate using the new vocabulary; for example, for a list of school supplies, students could go down the list and ask their partners which of the items they have in their backpack or locker.
- Conduct a survey of classmates using the new vocabulary; for example, to practice reflexive verbs related to one's daily routine, students could conduct a survey to find out what time most of their classmates wake up, get up, and go to bed.
- Answer questions about a diagram involving the new vocabulary, such as the relationships depicted on a family tree, or the proper categorization of items in the food pyramid.
- Describe pictures involving the new vocabulary, such as drawings of customers trying on new clothes that are too large or too tight, or a picture of a messy room in which various chores need to be done in order to clean up.
- Answer questions about an oral or written text containing many of the new words, such as a weather forecast describing different types of weather in various regions, or a real estate advertisement listing the rooms and amenities available in an apartment for rent.
- Answer personal questions using the vocabulary; for example, in a unit on work-related terms, students could discuss whether they have worked full or part time, whether they had benefits, if they were paid minimum wage, etc.
- Play word games that use the vocabulary, such as Categories, Jeopardy, Concentration, Go Fish, or Fruit Basket. (See Taylor's book *Me gusta jugar* for more ideas.)

Using Vocabulary in Theme-Based Communication

At this stage, the focus shifts away from vocabulary practice for its own sake toward real-life communicative purposes. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss theme-based uses of language, the possibilities are almost endless. Activities can address the interpersonal mode, as students speak with each other, with the teacher, or with native speakers about the theme; the interpretive mode, as students read or listen to theme-related messages; and presentational mode, as students prepare oral or written expositions on the theme. Here we would merely mention the importance of incorporating activities that involve a real-life communicative purpose, as well as the importance of exposing students to authentic texts in the target language, whether oral or written.

We would also add a brief word about the role of culture in theme-based learning. In our opinion, the most effective theme-based materials are those that engage students in thinking about the cultural issues related to each theme. This type of content addresses the Cultures goal area of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, which specify that students will learn about the products and practices of the target culture as well as the cultural perspectives that underlie them. The Comparisons goal area of the *Standards* may also be addressed by asking students to compare the target culture's take on each theme with that of their own culture. For example, in a unit on food, students could learn about foods that are commonly eaten in the target culture (a cultural product), as well as the times of day and situations in which various foods are eaten (a cultural practice). They might then be asked to think about why people in many Spanish-speaking countries make daily trips to the market to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, or why they enjoy leisurely meals with family and friends (cultural perspectives). Finally, they might consider food-related products and practices in their own culture, such as instant foods, vending machines, and fast food restaurants, and compare the two cultures in terms of their perspectives and values.

As of this writing, studies have found that while current textbooks are increasingly incorporating cultural products and practices, they continue to lack activities that engage students in thinking about cultural perspectives, or in making comparisons between the target culture and their own (Bautista, 2005, Bateman & Mattos, in press; Young, 1999). Thus, it often falls to the teacher to incorporate cultural perspectives and comparisons in relation to each theme. This implies that teachers must know something about how the themes to be addressed are manifested in the target culture, which is no small demand. In our experience, however, the demands of theme-based teaching are more than compensated for by increased levels of interest and participation, as students participate in listening to, speaking, reading, and writing about topics that are meaningful to them.

Other Techniques for Introducing Theme-Based Vocabulary

There exist many other techniques for teaching theme-based vocabulary. Among them are Total Physical Response, which requires students to perform actions related to the new words (such as pointing to parts of the body or picking up various classroom objects); TPR Storytelling, which teaches new words by repeating them multiple times in the context of an imaginative story; or teaching theme-related songs that contain many of the new words to be learned. Resourceful teachers will seek to master multiple techniques for introducing new vocabulary, in order to address different types of vocabulary (nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.), as well as to better meet the diverse learning styles and preferences of their students.

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