

ENGLISH ROUNDTABLE: TEACHING VOCABULARY

Teaching vocabulary seems to be a key component in any Asian English teaching curriculum. Teachers are always looking for ways to help their students learn more words quickly. But what do they mean by learn? Do they mean just memorization? What words are the students supposed to learn and for what purpose? Do teachers make a distinction between learning words for passive knowledge or for active use? Or, are students just learning words to pass the all important high stakes tests?

These are some of the issues and questions we would like to explore in our next **English Roundtable on May 13th at 2pm Beijing time**. We hope to see you online!

May 13, 2008
06:00 GMT

Webchat Moderator: Welcome everyone. The webchat will begin soon. As Mr. Anderson notes, you may begin sending in your questions now!

Webchat Moderator: Welcome everyone, we'll begin in just a moment.

Damon Anderson: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Damon. It is good to be with you this afternoon. Before we begin, let me just express the concerns of all of us putting together this web chat regarding the terrible natural disasters that have caused so much tragedy and death in the Asia region. Our thoughts are with the victims of these disasters.

Damon Anderson: We are here today to discuss the teaching and learning of vocabulary.

Naimat Ullah Khan: Dear Anderson, Its good to have you again with us, I am sure that your session will benefits us more. What should be a Midst way to increase vocabulary?

Damon Anderson: Naimat, you have asked several good questions today. Let me address a couple of them to start off with, including the one on the screen right now.

You asked if age makes a difference in the methods that we use. The answer is yes! If we follow the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky we know that young learners do not develop critical thinking skills until much later.

So, the vocabulary we teach and the way we teach vocabulary should be related to the students' cognitive development.

Naimat Ullah Khan: Situation base teaching & learning helps alot, can you brief us more on this?

Damon Anderson: One of the best things in helping our students to remember vocabulary is to help them develop cognitive hooks that they can use to access the words.

Teaching them the words in context or in a related situation helps to supply these cognitive hooks.

For example, when you teach the work refrigerator. Don't just show the word and pronounce it. Also, don't just show a picture of a refrigerator.

Show a picture of two refrigerators with their doors open, but one should be empty and one should show food inside. Then ask the student which refrigerator they would rather have.

This kind of cognitive hook helps the students to remember better.

Teaching vocabulary in context not only helps students to understand the meanings, but it gives them some hooks to hang the memory to.

Webchat Moderator: Our chat is underway. Welcome to those of you just joining us. We are posting selected questions to this page. If you'd like to introduce yourself to today's group, please do!

Mohammad Hanif Hamid: Hi everybody. this is Mohammad Hanif Hamid from Kabul: What about teaching the new vocabularies in "chunks"? Does it help the learners to learn the new vocabularies and use them right a way?

Damon Anderson: Hi Mohammad Hanif, welcome! Great question. Yes, teaching vocabulary in chunks or collocations is excellent. It is the newest trend.

fwn812: sounds very nice to give them some hooks to hang the memory.

Damon Anderson: By teaching words in chunks or collocations students learning how to use words appropriately and not just learn the meaning of the words.

Naimat Ullah Khan: What are the do's & don'ts of building our vocabulary? can you brief?

Damon Anderson: Dos and Don'ts, that is a good question. Some of the Dos I have just explained. You also need to let the students know which words are to be known for their active vocabulary and which are for their passive vocabulary.

Not all words need to be learned for an active vocabulary. But you should remember which you say is for which vocabulary and then assess the students accordingly.

Words should not be taught in isolation.

When I was in high school and university, our language teachers made us memorize long lists of words. Most of which were not for an active vocabulary.

We had to try and find our own hooks, but it was difficult because we did not always understand the real use of the words.

Mohammad Hanif Hamid: How many times do we need to expose the learners to the new vocabularies before they internalise them ?

Damon Anderson: Mohammad, that is a good question. It is not just exposure that needs to happen, but it is actual use of the words that needs to happen. One theory is that a person needs to use a word at least five times within a day to internalize it.

Naimat Ullah Khan: Dont you feel a there is a major difference in Asian Pacific English learners & South East Asian English Learner & Spanish origin English Learner. Do you think a Unified teaching method could help them out?

Damon Anderson: There is an Asian English that is beginning to pop up. Actually it is slightly different in each country: Chinese-English, Indonesian-English, etc. This is a natural occurrence.

But there is not a real difference in learners themselves. The difference in learning English is how different their language is to English.

Because some speakers of some languages have problems with sounds in English that other speakers of other languages don't.

Also, some speakers of some languages have problems with some grammar that is different from their language.

Sometimes, culture makes a difference. One example it that of the concept of time.

In the west, time is something concrete and that is reflected in the many idioms regarding time.

In some cultures, time is not concrete and is not even important, so the concept of time in English is hard to understand.

Webchat Moderator: Welcome to those of you just joining us. Mr. Anderson continues to review your many questions. Thank you for your patience!

Wang Ping: I know in an Intensive English Class in China, students generally are exposed to over 50 new words or even more in a single lesson, that would take too much of the teaching time and leaves little for activities. How should the teachers choose the right ways to teach the vocabulary to the context? How important is the context in which the vocabulary occur?

Damon Anderson: Good question Ping. The context is extremely important. It is better to take time to teach the vocabulary in context and have the students fully understand the word, than just to teach the word in isolation and risk a lack of understanding.

Naimat Ullah Khan: Usually people try to learn English through their mother tongue grammar structure & sentence composition? how does it effect the International English? Doesn't it creates comprehension problem.

Damon Anderson: Learning English through your mother tongue is natural. But learners need to understand the differences.

Mohammad Hanif Hamid: Do you think using native language of the learners are useful for teaching new vocabulary? If yes, to what degree?

Damon Anderson: Mohammad, that is a good question. I think it depends on the age of the student and the level of the student, as well as the type of vocabulary you are trying to work with.

I think that with difficult concepts, such as the word "courage" it may be helpful to express this in the student's mother tongue first, if you happen to know it.

Using the mother tongue, however, can really only be done in homogeneous classes. That is classes in which all the students use the same mother tongue. It is unfair to use this in classes where students are mixed.

Translation should not be word by word. You as a teacher should help students to understand this. Context and collocations or word groups can give more precise meaning to the words.

Naimat Ullah Khan: Most of the people use to convert there real life communicative contexts into foreign language, some times word by word translation. How does this affect the real learning?

Webchat Moderator: Thank you for your many questions! Mr. Anderson continues to review them.

Naimat Ullah Khan: Telling the forms of words & science behind the word composition at the same time. Does it helps or confuses the learner?

Damon Anderson: Students should learn the form of the words so they know how to use the word. To discuss the history of the word is not so important, especially if it would only confuse the students more.

The etymology of a word is useful if you are teaching things like prefixes and suffixes

Naimat Ullah Khan: How do you think International English will cover Lingua-Franka? when there is major difference in Pronunciations & perspectives.

Damon Anderson: There is now and has been considerable differences in the pronunciation of English around the world, yet it is still the lingua-franca.

If you go to Wales, or Ireland or Scotland, or New York, or Charlotte North Carolina, or Maine, you will hear different accents and pronunciations of words.

There are regionalizations in terms of use of vocabulary as well.

In some places in the U.S. they say "soda", but in others "pop", in others "cola". But generally people will understand each other because of the context. That is why teaching words in context is important. Even native speakers use context to understand each other.

Damon Anderson: The Lingua-Franca means the world language. English is now used around the world more than any other language (I am not talking about numbers of speakers.).

Naimat Ullah Khan: How we can use correct words in English?

Damon Anderson: Choosing the correct word, depends on the context and the meaning the speaker/writer is trying to convey.

Phanisara: What is your view on the use of electronic dictionary versus paper-based dictionary in the EFL classrooms?

Damon Anderson: Thanks for the question, Nina. Most of the electronic dictionaries are based on the paper ones. However, some of the electronic ones can be updated easily, whereas the paper dictionary cannot be updated so easily.

Damon Anderson: I prefer to use Webster's online dictionary because it is frequently updated and has many of the new idioms and terms in it.

Damon Anderson: Which do you prefer, Nina? Why?

Phanisara: I like the electronic version. It is simpler to use and though it is not perfect, there's an option for students to hear how words are pronounced.

Naimat Ullah Khan: US English Teaching Forum, which is an initiative of US Dept of State, is also a very strong tool to help English language teachers. Does US department of State have some more initiatives like this, would you like to share?

Damon Anderson: Naimat, thank you for mentioning this. I hope you are all getting the English Teaching Forum. There are several books and videos regarding English teaching that are put out by the Office of English Language

Programs in the U.S. Department of State. For more information, just go to <http://www.englishprograms.state.gov>.

Damon Anderson: Nina, I too like the pronunciation part of the electronic dictionaries.

I also like the electronic ones that I can write a sentence and it will attempt to translate the sentence.

Damon Anderson: These are not perfect yet, but they help.

fwn812: yes, not perfect yet, but they help

Naimat Ullah Khan: Well one more interesting thing I would like to share, the adaptability of English to the native language is rapidly increasing, affecting the perspective of local languages. How do you visualise this?

Damon Anderson: This is a good observation and question. Do any of you have an idea about this to share?

Wang Ping: I'm concerned learners are getting so reliant on the dictionaries without taking the trouble to learn the words

Damon Anderson: Do you think that students really rely too much on dictionaries. Maybe that is because they have not had enough engagement with trying to speak English, but only write it.

Damon Anderson: If they were to engage in speaking more, they would become frustrated with trying to look up words so often in the dictionary.

Damon Anderson: I believe that students should be taught how to try and say what they do not yet know how to say, and then learn vocabulary from trying. For example, when learning bahasa Indonesian, I did not know the word for beach, so I used the words I knew and told the taxi driver I wanted to go to the place where the earth meets the sea. He laughed, but understood and taught me the word for beach. I won't forget that word.

Wang Ping: I know it took an English teacher over 10 minutes once to explain to the students the meaning of "jail" in English. He had to resort to his mother tongue and it was done in seconds!

Damon Anderson: Yes, time is a big constraint when teaching vocabulary. Using the mother tongue can cut corners, as we say in English.

fwn812: yes, sounds very good infer, students haven't engagement practice

Wang Ping: Learning through using, I agree. And I would encourage students to be creative in using what they've learned in class, to create the hooks they can hang on in their memory.

Damon Anderson: Yes, I agree, Ping.

Naimat Ullah Khan: How effective is EFL & ESL for the foreigners, who can't speak English? Are these courses strong enough to make them competitive to native English speakers?

Damon Anderson: According to David Crystal, there are 4 times more non-native speakers of English than native speakers. So, most learners of English are more likely to use English with a non-native speaker than a native speaker.

Saida: Teaching English as a second language, is it better to be at early age like 5 or 6 or keep it later for students?

Damon Anderson: Saida, this is really a hot topic in the field of teaching foreign languages. There are arguments for both sides.

Wang Ping: The most successful language learners are more often the self-motivated, more creative and risk-taking in trying out new languages

Damon Anderson: Ping, you are correct. The more engaged and active learners are generally the most successful.

Saida: That's right motivation is number one key to learning any language

Wang Ping: I would say it's a good idea to expose kids as young as 5 to English, to get them interested, engaged through a variety of means appropriate to their age and knowledge such as jazz chants, rhythms, dramas.

Damon Anderson: If you are teaching very young learners, be sure you are teaching appropriate vocabulary. That is, according to Piaget and Vygotsky and others, teach more concrete vocabulary and not abstract words.

Phanisara: Students also do need to recognize their own learning styles. For example, visual learners might find dictionary to be a major tool for vocabulary learning and building, especially through the use of thesaurus option with synonyms and antonyms.

Wang Ping: In terms of learning pronunciation, I think it's good for kids to start early but also be careful not to kill the joy of learning by overburden

Damon Anderson: It is important for students to understand what their best learning style and strategies are and to use them. Maybe we should do a chat on this. What do you think?

Wang Ping: If children start to learn English from a young age, make sure what they will learn later in primary school, middle school and also in college are carefully structured and graded

Naimat Ullah Khan: forward to Wang Ping statement, trying to teach real life tasks by distributing it into language contents could help to better deliver, do you agree Anderson?

Damon Anderson: It is important to always put language in context. Context is what gives the real meaning. Some journalists, for example, take things out of context and it changes the meaning of what was said.

Wang Ping: or they might feel bored or demotivated with overlapping or repetitive materials

Saida: Yes I agree to have a chat on best learning strategies and style.

Damon Anderson: Great, we make that the topic of our next chat.

Damon Anderson: I know a couple of you, so let me ask you, Nina and Ping and Mohammad, how did you learn vocabulary so well?

Wang Ping: I know someone who's really good in learning vocabulary. He reads in general, magazines, newspapers, also watch movies. That helps a lot

Phanisara: I love to watch/read the closed captioning while watching T.V./movies. This has helped me.

Wang Ping: I am curious whether the people designing the English Curriculum for different levels in the system are the same group of people, or if they aren't. Do they coordinate with each other?

Damon Anderson: The answer in most Asian countries is simply NO.

They don't know each other and they don't coordinate. This is what makes our jobs so challenging.

Phanisara: It would be interesting to find out the similarities and differences of our Asian EFL learning styles.

Damon Anderson: I agree. So this will be a great topic for our next chat.

Damon Anderson: WOW! This has been a great chat!!! Thank you all for your great contributions of questions and comments.

Wang Ping: Thank you all for the wonderful discussion! So nice to talk to you again Nina and Hanif! I hope you both are doing well!

Webchat Moderator: Dear participants, thank you for joining us today! Learn about other upcoming webchats at <http://www.america.gov/multimedia/askamerica.html>. Our next English

Language Roundtable will take place on June 4 at 14:00 Beijing time 06:00 GMT.

fwn812: Dear Damon, many thank you share pleasure time

Damon Anderson: Our next English Roundtable topic will be Learning Styles and Strategies. Please tell your friends and colleagues about it!!!

Saida: Thanks a lot dear Anderson for having this wonderful discussion with us.

Damon Anderson: Thank you all so much. Have a great rest of the day!!! Cheers!

Saida: Thanks to Wang Ping too for his great ideas

charlotte: thanks

Wang Ping: Thank you Saida and everyone else! Hope to see you again next time!