

More Surefire Ways to Increase the Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge

A Response to Shoba Bandi-Rao's
"Nontraditional Students' Insight into Vocabulary Learning
in the ESL Classroom"
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In her article for this journal, Shoba Bandi-Rao (2018) reminds English language instructors of the importance of English language learners' (ELLs) vocabulary knowledge for their academic success. Bandi-Rao's call to "leverage and build on learning strategies" (p. 51) that nontraditional ELLs use is valid and important to students using English as an additional language (EAL).

In comparing the responses of 23 nontraditional students from seven different language backgrounds to the meaning of 10 college-level words in a multiple-choice questionnaire to their use of the same words in writing and speech, Bandi-Rao found a disconnect between *knowing the meaning of the word* and *using the same word in a meaningful sentence* [author emphasis]. In small-group discussions Bandi-Rao conducted, the participants provided some reasons for such a disconnect, including what nontraditional ELLs felt unsure of in the meaning and/or pronunciation of specific words or words new to them—words perhaps on a higher or more sophisticated vocabulary level—that they could not remember while speaking or writing and were accustomed to using simpler, everyday words. These results align with research that conceptually distinguishes between the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge (e.g., Qian, 2002; Zhang & Lu, 2015): While breadth refers to the size or number of words that ELLs know, depth indicates how well ELLs use words in terms of spelling, pronunciation, hyponymy, and collocations (Schmitt, 2014).

As an adjunct faculty working with diverse international EAL students in different universities in New York State, I see this dissociation persist. Many students in the English for academic purposes (EAP) courses I teach, regardless of their language proficiency level, find it difficult to use some academic vocabulary words in their writing and speech for reasons similar to those of Bandi-Rao's participants; overall, however, they tend to use college-level words in their writing more than in their speech. Many of my students have stated that compared with writing activities, time allocated for speaking activities is not sufficient—in other words, when students write, they have more time to process language and to check their work, or think about appropriate vocabulary. However, when speaking, one needs to produce continuous speech and thus cannot retrieve the needed words so fast.

This reality for my students, well known in English language teaching, suggests that instructors need to design varied speaking activities, such as in-class presentations requiring students to use academic words, to strengthen their effectiveness as teachers of EAL students. Instructors also need to be aware of the importance of the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge in ELLs' academic communications. Researchers have found that both factors are predictors of reading fluency and comprehension (Wang, 2014; Zhang & Lu, 2015). As Bandi-Rao observes, by building on what students already do, instructors can broaden their repertoire of teaching strategies for enhancing language learning. For example, Bandi-Rao found that her participants used such strategies as mnemonics, jokes, prosody (e.g., stress and intonation), and images to learn and remember words in class. Following this observation, she urges that

ESL instructors should build on these strategies and “reinforce the college-level words during class time whenever the opportunity arises, and not to rely on assigning vocabulary practice outside of class” (p. 58).

In my classes, I use two strategies to help EAL students know words and use them in their speech and writing. In speaking activities, to help them produce conversational texts, I design class activities by assigning specific words to each student; then, that student will be responsible for teaching these words to a partner. In writing activities, I ask students to peer review their partner’s draft, focusing on vocabulary breadth and depth. In my guidelines for peer review, I include a question about vocabulary words—such as, for example, if some words are used more effectively than others. Before asking students to do it, I model it: I read sentences aloud, and when I pause because of a vague word choice, I ask such questions as, “What does this word mean?” “Is it the right word choice?” These strategies may help in ensuring appropriate vocabulary choice, and thus improve reading comprehension and critical thinking.

I conclude by urging that English language instructors should pay close attention to the instructional effectiveness of targeting vocabulary knowledge in their lesson planning and teaching. As Bandi-Rao indicates, instructors can “build” on student learning strategies such as mnemonic and create their own to “leverage” these strategies (p. 51). In addition, it is important that each instructor use not only research and theory, but also one’s individual classroom practice.

References

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