

From Module 3 Unit 10

What is a word?

As competent readers, we can distinguish words in a sentence without difficulty. They each have a space that separates them from the words around them, and they often have a very specific meaning that we can put into other words. Sometimes we have difficulty explaining (to ourselves/to a friend) what a word means and we sometimes end up in frustration saying *I know what it means, but I just can't explain it!* For example, how would you tell a student what the word *yet* means?

However, as soon as we start to define what we mean by a *word*, this stable picture starts to unravel to some degree. We all know of words that look identical but have different meanings. **Homographs** are words that have the same spelling and might be pronounced the same or differently, but which have different meanings. (e.g. the *bow* of a ship and a *bow* and arrow) A **homophone** is a word that is pronounced the same as another word, but which has a different meaning or a different spelling. (e.g. *so* and *sew*). Look through your dictionary and see how many different meanings you can find for the word *case*.

Task 1 *

How many different meanings can you think of for the word 'class'? When you have made a list, check in a dictionary.

If you read that someone is a *used-car* salesman, is this one word or two? Sometimes we will place hyphens while in other cases we won't. For example, we will talk about a *cost-effective method*, with a hyphenated word in front of the noun. Is *cost-effective* a single word? If we take the noun away, we will describe a system as being *cost effective* and we would certainly define these as two separate words. This use of hyphenated words in front of nouns commonly confuses even native speakers so it would not be surprising if students were unsure as well. Look at the following examples of words, or are they combinations of words?

- house-husband
- eyeball
- hyperinflation
- henpecked
- ginormous (a combination of *gigantic* and *enormous*)
- sitcom
- sin-bin
- dilly-dally
- so-so
- once-in-a-lifetime
- never-to-be-forgotten
- high-handed (a high-handed action)
- fair skinned (a fair-skinned family)

As teachers we may want to defer the question of whether these are individual *words* or not and instead concentrate on whether or not they act as individual units of *meaning*. If they do, then our best approach would be to teach them as such and regard them as a word, and only explore what we mean by *word* with an advanced group, as the need arises.

We also have the difficulty of meaning. A language is never static; it changes constantly. It is easy to think about the many words that have entered the language over the last twenty years, or are pre-existing words that have become much more widely used: *modem, mobile, catalytic, hard disk, format, laminate* and so on. You will have noticed that the vast majority of the new words are scientific and this reflects the world we live in today. One non-technical word that has dramatically changed its meaning is the word *gay*. Conversely, there are words that are dropping out of the language as life styles change. How many people today can clearly distinguish between *lounge, drawing room, living room* and *sitting room*?

As soon as we enter the realms of a new language as a learner, we enter a new culture. Some of the difficulties we experience as learners derive from differences in the culture and lifestyle of the people. The Eskimos have dozens of words to describe snow, while

many Arab groups have hundreds of words to describe different types of sand conditions and words that relate to their camels. Cattle-herding peoples in Africa have a wide vocabulary of words relating to their cattle; learning their language is learning to understand their culture. Although most European students learning English will experience fewer difficulties in this regard, many learners of English from other cultures will nevertheless have to make a step into a new world if they are to learn the language successfully. As teachers, we should be conscious of these difficulties.

Selecting the vocabulary

In most cases we will be helped in the selection of new vocabulary items by the course book that we use. However, to some degree the selection of the vocabulary that we will teach will also rest with us as teachers. On what basis are we going to make a choice? One very important factor in the selection of vocabulary is the **frequency** of the word. There would be little point in teaching words to the students if they were rarely likely to need them or use them. The frequency of an item is particularly important at the earlier stages of learning, but it continues to be a factor throughout the learning process.

The issue of frequency first began to be seen as an issue in the early 1950s when Michael West produced a frequency word count based on a wide selection of reading materials. Subsequent frequency studies have developed this approach more fully and have included spoken language, and today many of the course books refer to word counts in order to introduce new vocabulary in a structured way. The availability of computers has added a new dimension to this work; one of the most recent approaches to frequency counts has been the influential Collins/University of Birmingham Cobuild project that has been used by publishers in the preparation of dictionaries and course books.

However, in many cases the actual vocabulary that you introduce in your teaching will depend upon the needs and the ages of your students. A group of Japanese business people will have very different needs from a group of young students, while a class of nurses may require very specialised vocabulary.

Productive and receptive vocabulary

Your students will have particular lexical needs, but this does not necessarily mean that they will use each lexical item in the same way. If you look through an English dictionary, you will find many words that you recognise but do not frequently use. Your everyday use of language may be restricted to a few thousand words plus a smaller specialised vocabulary restricted to your work or environment. When did you last use the words *boffin*, *desolate*, *intravenous*, *madam*, *occult*, *recess*, *snuffle* but you will recognise each of them and know the meaning too. These words are more likely to reside in your **receptive** vocabulary while your **productive** vocabulary is likely to contain those words that you more commonly use. This overlaps to some degree with the points made above about frequency; however, while frequency counts are based on counting many millions of words and have general validity, the issue of receptive/productive vocabulary has more individual relevance. A particular word for one person can have special importance and be regularly used. Another person may not use it at all. Words can also drop out of one's productive vocabulary; a word may be commonly used for a period of time, but perhaps only for a short period of time. A word can be particularly useful at one stage in life, but disappear completely at another.

As teachers, we need to ensure that the words our students need for their productive vocabulary are regularly practised using all of the language skills. As their needs change, so will their productive vocabulary, and hence their receptive vocabulary will gradually be enlarged. We are also likely to avoid spending time on new words that appear in a reading/listening passage but which are not significant in the understanding of that passage. We cannot teach every new word that appears in a passage, and if a word is of little importance in the overall understanding of the text, we can safely leave it until a later date.

Idiom, metaphor and similes

Our students, unless they are elementary, will also need to know about the unusual ways in which language can be used, where for example, we use well known words in an unusual context. **Idioms** are one such example. The meaning of an idiom cannot be worked out from the individual words so it presents a special kind of difficulty for the learner. The item has to be learnt as a whole and the meaning has to be taught with it.

Idioms like the ones listed below generally cannot be worked out logically by the students.

- to kick the bucket
- to let the cat out of the bag
- to face the music
- to pull the wool over someone's eyes
- to lead someone up the garden path
- to bite the dust
- to put the cat amongst the pigeons

Students always enjoy comparing the idioms that are used in different languages, and indeed there are often interesting similarities and amusing differences. This element of enjoyment makes idioms much easier to teach of course and are far more memorable for the students.

Metaphors and **similes** express an idea by relating two completely separate concepts. They are unlike idioms in that the expressions used are specifically designed to enable the listener/reader to understand the meaning clearly and very often the learners can guess the meaning. So, for example:

- the city is like a jungle (simile)
- my love is like a red, red rose (simile)
- a stony silence
- a volcanic temper
- a babbling brook
- the apple of my eye
- a broken heart

The difficulty for learners here is less in understanding these expressions, as using the correct wording. It would sound very comical to *pull the cotton over someone's eyes* or to *put a dog amongst the pigeons* and this inability to use other words in these expressions is a reflection of the **collocations** that exist in all languages, where words seem to naturally go together. In English for instance we can talk about a *heavy shower*, but a

not a *weighty* shower or a *large* shower. We can describe someone as *level headed* but not *flat headed*; we can describe minutes as *speeding* past or *creeping* past but not *walking* past or *striding* past. These are all links that our learners will have to make.

From Module 3 Unit 12

Test types

There are two main reasons why we might plan to test our students. The first reason can come under the heading of **formative testing** while the second is often described as **summative testing**. The first type is designed to help the teacher plan for the future, while the second type is designed to assess how much the students have absorbed from their language classes. Both can be divided into sub-tests which each have a different emphasis. For example, one part of the test might focus on listening skills while another might concentrate on writing skills.

Formative tests

Formative tests are designed to help the teacher to plan a programme of work in the future and if the test is well designed it will be to the advantage of the students. After administering the test, the teacher will know exactly which areas to concentrate on and will be able to target students' weak points. Formative tests can also be used to show whether a student has achieved the necessary degree of proficiency to successfully complete a new course of study, or perhaps to start a new job. In these ways, these tests are forward looking.

One type of formative test is called a **placement test** and this is administered to students at the start of a course so that they can be placed in the appropriate class or group. (There is of course, a continuing dialogue about the advantages and disadvantages of streaming, either between classes or within classes; however we will not address this issue here.) A placement test will attempt to obtain a wide spread of marks amongst the students so that their level can be established relatively easily and they can be placed in the group that is right for them. Placing students at a particular

level will have implications for teaching, and in this way the tests are designed to have an input into programmes of learning.

A second type of formative test is the **progress test**. A clear example of a progress test would be one that is given by a teacher at the end of a relatively short period of teaching, for example one term. The test is designed to assess how much the students have learnt over a period of time, or on a particular topic. The results of the test would then feed back into the teaching process with the teacher perhaps revising certain aspects before moving on to new topics. The test focuses on a short period of teaching/learning and the results will influence the next stage and so this can be seen as a formative test. A test of this nature is likely to have been designed, administered and marked by the class teacher.

A **proficiency test** can also be included under the formative heading. A test of this nature is less interested in how much the student has successfully learnt, but instead asks the question '*Does this learner have the necessary skills to complete a new course of study or successfully carry out a particular job?*' It is very unlikely that the class teacher will administer this type of test, and it is more likely to be administered by someone probably removed from the learners' classroom experiences. Typical of this type of test is the British Council/Cambridge IELTS test which is taken by overseas students before they start a university course in the UK, as well as to overseas doctors before they can practise in this country.

Summative tests

The most common form of summative test is that administered at school, regional or national level at the end of an academic year, or at the end of a student's course of study. While the internal school tests will probably have been prepared by the class teacher or the head of department, the national examinations will be based on a local or regional syllabus and are very unlikely to have been designed by teachers working in the classroom. They are likely to have been prepared by examination councils of one sort and another, where specialists in testing work full-time on test design and statistical analysis. Essentially, tests of this nature are looking back at the work that the students have done, and assessing how much has actually been learnt successfully. There is of

course, also a forward-looking element in these tests as well, since the results very often determine the next step taken by the student.

Task 2

1. Think about the tests and examinations that you have done over the last few years. Were they formative tests or summative tests?

2. If you have already worked as a teacher, think about the tests that your students have had to take. Were they formative or summative? When you have done that, think about *why* the test had that particular character.

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