

ESL Students and Vocabulary Problems

Tutoring students this quarter has taught me many things I hadn't previously realized. I saw students who struggled with translation problems, memorization, and even culture barriers that impacted their ability to speak and write English correctly. From personal experience with my own individual tutees, I found that the greatest problem among them all was their ability to remember key vocabulary words in English. Most of my students had a firm grasp on the English language and could speak it fairly fluently, but they struggled when they were assigned to respond to an article, read a novel, or write their own essay. After doing some research, I came across a case study conducted by Rita Ray who studied the advancement of ESL students based on different vocabulary teaching strategies. Rita acknowledged in her report that, "the vocabulary that students encounter frequently prevents them from understanding reading material and test questions." Although recognizing contextual clues and utilizing a dictionary or translator are always very helpful and appealing options to students, they are frequently very tedious and time consuming, which can also impact a student's level of understanding if their time is limited. In her study, Rita decided that the best course of action would be to have assigned hour-long periods each day that were focused on direct study of vocabulary. Each session typically utilized a variety of different vocabulary strategies, such as flash cards, word games, and the study of word roots. The study and memorization of prefixes and suffixes was the main focus of the session whereas the games and flash cards provided secondary backup.

In one of my tutoring sessions I was working with my tutee on writing the initial draft of an essay about child discipline. She had already articulated her main points to me, but there was a final and most important one that she could not find the words to articulate in English. After a few minutes of miscommunication, we came up with the fact that she thought mutual respect between a child and their parent was crucial in terms of discipline. The word respect was what really threw her off, so I took out a dictionary and focused on the root meanings of the word. It came from the Latin word respectus and the "re" prefix means to look back with consideration or regard. After a few minutes of discussing meanings, she came to realize how "spec" often means to see or to look. For some reason

this particular root stuck with her, which makes her further studies in the English language one step easier.

Marc Roberts, an online author of “Seven Things You Can Do to Help Your Students Learn More Words”, had some very insightful strategies that make learning (and remembering) vocabulary easy and quick. His first and foremost tip was that teachers should insist that ESL students always use an English-to-English pocket dictionary as much as possible. This will help to ease them away from their native language and force them to learn the new words as well as the meanings of those words in English. Roberts, like Rita, also put a lot of emphasis on the study of suffixes and prefixes. He also suggested that ESL students keep a vocabulary log, label unfamiliar things within the classroom, and purchase a word building book with crossword puzzles and games.

It would be stating the obvious to say that not all ESL learners are the same. Of course we all learn differently and at our own rates, but one of the most important things to consider when teaching vocabulary is the level of the students in the class. According to a website I found in my research, ESLGold, there are five levels of learning. For low-beginning students vocabulary should be limited to the basics such as emotions, body parts, food, and clothing. They should stick to things that can be experienced or seen first-hand and things that are common to most people. Nouns will be the most common part of speech. For high-beginning it is recommended that the words expand to every day items and relationships among these items such as careers, transportation, time, etc. Verbs will be more common among high-beginners. ESLGold says that low-intermediate students should, “focus on abstract and specialized words and word forms,” such as idioms or phrasal verbs. High-intermediate students are at a point where they have learned the basics and the most important part is simply expanding their vernacular, so they are recommended to focus their attention to a variety of different subjects and topics, simply for the exposure and practice. Lastly, but most important if one really wants to learn a language completely, advanced students should focus on the subtle distinctions in meaning and tone, within the context they see them. For example, they should be able to understand sarcasm, irony, or maybe even a logical fallacy.

Within a tutoring session, I had some tutees who were very smart but felt less capable when it came to English. They knew the answer or meaning in their head, but felt self-conscious for not remembering how to articulate it in English. A classic and embarrassing example of mine happened when I used the appeal of abortions as an example. My tutee gave me a silent blank stare and then asked me, simply, what an abortion was. After some awkward explanations back and forth, we got back on the same page. However, my tutee was so incredibly embarrassed for seeming as if she didn't know what an abortion was. I think the best anyone can do in this situation, other than recommend some of the aforementioned vocabulary strategies, would be to encourage her to keep trying and emphasize that practice makes perfect. There are hundreds of thousands of words in the English language, and many of those words can have a handful of meanings depending on their context. To make my tutees feel better, I often emphasize that even I, a native speaker of English for almost 20 years, still occasionally forget the meaning of certain words. It happens to all of us, and it's not something we should feel bad or self-conscious about.

In Rita's case study, she found that after holding hour-long daily sessions with students for six weeks, they all seemed to benefit greatly in their ability to memorize and correctly utilize new vocabulary words. Some students even came and thanked her saying that they needed the specialized vocabulary instruction more than they needed a composition or grammar class. She credits most of the student's improvements to their study of prefixes and suffixes, which is something I have always supported. Being a language nerd all of my life, I was always interested in the different parts within words. Typically each part has a different meaning and when you compose the meanings together, you are left with the meaning of the word in its entirety. This has always left me fascinated. From personal experience I can truthfully say that, for as long as I can remember, I have been able to discern completely new and unfamiliar vocabulary words correctly at least 90% of the time as long as I know one of the roots within the word. It was fairly easy for me, so I am confident that with a little bit of practice and dedication, it could benefit a majority of ESL students as well. Lastly, I would like to add some advice from an ESL teacher Kari Miller, who gives tips on the direct teaching of vocabulary. No more than ten to twelve new words should be learned at a time. Most

learners need to experience the word in a variety of different contexts anywhere from five to sixteen different times before they will fully understand and remember. Repetition is key, as a large majority of new words learned are quickly forgotten within the first twenty-four hours. The variety of ways in which they are presented with the word is also crucial because students need to recognize the multiple contexts in which the word can be presented in English.

From my own tutoring experiences, as well as those researched by many professional teachers, vocabulary is a common hurdle for most ESL students. However, with regular practice and the implementation of a variety of strategies, it is possible to overcome. At any level of learning, it seems that understanding the meanings of the roots of English words always benefits the student to an extent. However, for the best and most well-rounded results, both teacher and student should take advantage of a variety of sources that are available from dictionaries to crossword puzzles. Practice makes perfect.

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Kari Miller

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Marc Roberts

“ESL Students Need More Vocabulary”

http://esllanguageschools.suite101.com/article.cfm/esl_students_need_more_vocabula