

Word Games

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While helping learners of English as a second language, the teacher is often confronted with the task of increasing their vocabulary. Which words to focus on is often determined by the lexicon used in the prescribed textbooks. However, ideally, it should be decided on the basis of two factors:

- (i) What are the needs of the learner?
- (ii) Which words are needed to carry on everyday conversation in colloquial English?

A book on corpus-based analysis of English could help us in getting ready for the task.

The classical *The General Service List of English Words* compiled by Michael West (1953) was based on manual frequency counts of written works. Charles Ogden's (1930) *Basic English* was another attempt in this direction. Now we have several general corpora based on computer-generated frequency counts. Some of these include: *The British National Corpus* (BNC), the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), the *Brown Corpus*, the *COBUILD English Data Base*, the *Lancaster/Oslo Bergen Corpus*, etc. A comparison of these corpora has enabled pedagogues to identify which words are used most frequently.

Broadly speaking, we can divide the lexicon of English into two groups: *function words* and *substantives*. Function words are better known for their grammatical functions than for their literal meanings. For instance, in the sentence: *Did you come here yesterday?* *Did*

carries the tense of the main verb *come*; its position indicates that the sentence is interrogative. The most frequently used function verbs are *be* (with its various forms, *am, is, are, was, were, been* and *being*), *have* and its other forms (*has, had, having*) and *do* (along with *does* and *did*). Auxiliary verbs such as *will, shall, would, should, can, could, may* and *might* are also function words. Prepositions, such as *in, on, at, of, to, for, by, with*, are most frequently used and so are conjunctions, such as *and, or, that, if, but* and *which*. Negative markers such as *no* and *not* are function words and so are the determiners *a, an, the, this, these, that, those*. Personal pronouns such as *I, we, you, he, she, it, they* and *their* in their various case forms may also be treated as function words.

Among the substantives are nouns such as *man, woman, people, boy, girl, child, time, day, night, year, life, thing, world, government, number, system, case, group, party, family*, etc.; adjectives such as *new, old, good, bad, great, big, small, high, low, full, empty, able, different*, etc.; and verbs such as *say, tell, know, come, go, get, see, make, give, take, use, become, begin, find, ask, help* and *seem*. The combinations of these verbs with some prepositions (which are then considered as particles) give us many more verbs. Many of these words are usually included in elementary textbooks but some are not. On the other hand, they may use words such as *well*, which are not used in everyday conversation.

Teachers may organise word games which involve frequently used words. This will help students in getting familiar with such words, including their pronunciation and spelling. At a later stage, games may be improvised which involve the use of these words in sentences. The word games that can be easily played are *antakshari* (chain spelling), *anagram*, *synonyms*, *antonyms*, *scrambling*, *scrabble* and *puzzles*.

Antakshari

In a modified form of *Antakshari* which we may call “chain spelling”, the teacher gives a word which a student has to spell, emphasising the last letter of its spelling. The next student then gives another word which begins with the last letter of the previous word and emphasizes the last letter of its spelling. The next student gives a new word beginning with the last letter of the previous word. The game goes on until all the students have had a turn. For instance,

Teacher: man...n
 1st student: number...r
 2nd student: read...d
 3rd student: day...y
 4th student: young...g
 5th student: great...t
 6th student: time...e
 7th student: end...d
 8th student: do...o
 9th student: old...d
 10th student: dog...g
 11th student: good...d
 12th student: dark...k
 13th student: kid...d
 14th student: down...n
 15th student: near...r

Another modified form of *Antakshari* can be played between two or more persons. In this form, the teacher speaks out two lines of a poem. One student identifies the last sound or letter of the cited word and responds by reciting one or two lines of the same or another poem beginning with the same sound/letter. Another student picks up the last sound/letter of the poem just recited and speaks another one or two lines of the poem beginning with that sound/letter. This process continues for as long as the players/participants want. Here is an example of such an exchange of lines based on nursery rhymes.

X: The queen of hearts,
 She made some tarts...s
 Y: Solomon Grandy
 Born on Monday...y
 Z: Yes sir, yes sir
 Three bags full...l
 A: Little Tommy Tucker
 Sings for his supper...r
 B: Rain, rain, go away,
 Come again another day...y
 C: You may get there by candle light,
 If your hearts are nimble and light...t
 D: The king of France came down the hill,
 And never went up again...n
 E: Nine, ten,
 A big fat hen...n
 F: N was a nut,
 So smooth and brown...n
 G: N was once a little needle,
 Needly
 Tweedly
 Threadly
 Needly...y

H: Y was once a little yew

Growdy, Grewdy

Little yew...

Anagram

Anagram involves the rearrangement of the letters of a word in such a way that a new, meaningful word is formed. For instance, if the teacher gives the word *but*, the only possible anagram is *tub* because all other combinations (*utb*, *ubt*, *tbu*, *btu*) are meaningless. If somebody says *name*, the response could be *mean* or *mane*. *Mane* is not a frequently used word but, given the rules of anagram, it is a correct response. Efforts should be made to start the game with simple, frequently-used words, for instance, *on-no*, *not-ton*, *life-file*, *pit-tip*, *from-form*, *part-trap*, *case-ease*, *end-den*, *what-thaw*, *time-mite*, *tea-eat*, *charm-march*, *pan-nap*, *war-raw*, etc. Children may be allowed to use whichever word they can handle provided its letters can be manipulated to have another word.

Synonyms

Finding *synonyms* of a word is also a good exercise; it means finding another word which has a similar meaning. For instance, if a student says *right*, another may respond by saying *correct*. He/she uses the word *large*, to which the response is *big*. Similarly, we can have *able-fit*, *new-fresh*, *sharp-bright*, *gifted-talented*, *fair-just*, *fresh-new*, *cold-chilly*, *warm-tepid*, *correct-right*, *crazy-stupid*, *deny-refuse*, *fix-set*, *friend-buddy*, *make-create*, *many-several*, etc.

Antonyms

Another game could be organised to ask student the *antonyms* (opposite) of a given word. For instance, the teacher could say

good to which a student responds by saying *bad*. Similarly, we can have antonym sets such as *bright-dull*, *high-low*, *right-wrong*, *young-old*, *sweet-sour*, *large-small*, *full-empty*, *same-different*, *able-unable*, *fit-unfit*, *push-pull*, *give-take*, *light-dark*, *cooked-raw*, *nice-bad*, etc. The students can take turns giving opposites. The game continues until every student has had a turn. The teacher will intervene only when a student is unable to come up with an appropriate antonym. Another form of this game is as follows: The teacher gives two columns of words. In the first list, some words are given and in the second set their antonyms are given in a jumbled manner. The student has to link the word to its antonym. For example, we may have the following sets of opposite words, which the student has to put in matching pairs by linking them with lines.

strong	take
small	go
close	weak
dark	full
before	after
much	open
good	light
empty	large
give	little
come	bad

Scrambling Words and Sentences

To *scramble* means to make something jumbled or muddled. A word is a conventionally agreed systematic arrangement of sounds. If they are not systematically arranged, they are merely a collection of scrambled sounds. As a word game, scrambling begins with a jumbled collection of letters which can be transformed into a word if the letters representing the

sounds are properly arranged and this has to be done quickly. For instance, if they are given a jumbled sound *evig*, they should be able to arrange it as *give*—a meaningful word. Some other examples are: *work* from *krow*, *give* from *vige*, *large* from *gerla*, *year* from *reay*, *help* from *pleh*, *case* from *sace*. The teacher writes down a scrambled word on the board and one student gives the correct answer. If one student fails, another may try. The teacher may scramble the words students are familiar with and encourage them to put them in the correct order as promptly as possible.

Another form of scrambling may have the scrambled word followed by its meaning, which helps the student in recollecting the correctly spelt word quickly, as in the following:

[oekj]: what someone says for amusement (joke)

[vilajo]: cheerful and friendly (jovial)

[kunj]: old or discarded articles that are useless (junk)

[tisser]: a girl in relation to other girls or boys of the same parents (sister)

[seohu]: a building in which people live (house)

[gema]: a form of sport played according to rules (game)

[poson]: an implement for serving or eating food (spoon)

Another word game involves putting words in a scrambled *sentence* in the correct order. The teacher may write a scrambled sentence on the board and ask the students to put them in order correctly as in the following cases:

From came school she back late home.

(She came back home late from school.)

Homework waiting was her for her.

(Her homework was waiting for her.)

Tired was she sleepy and.

(She was tired and sleepy.)

Snacks had she fell and asleep.

(She had snacks and fell asleep.)

Up she woke night late at.

(She woke up late at night.)

She speaks very well English.

(She speaks English very well.)

Opposite the school a new building they are proposing.

(They are proposing a new building opposite the school.)

All we felt very hungry.

(We all felt very hungry.)

I would not probably see you tomorrow.

(Probably, I would not see you tomorrow.)

She is late always.

(She is always late.)

She is on time never.

(She is never on time.)

She gave to me a book.

(She gave a book to me.)

Scrabble

Another word game is *scrabble*. In a simpler form of scrabble, some letters of the words are given and students are asked to fill in the missing letters, as in the following. The meanings of the words are also given to help the students.

d		y
---	--	---

'opposite of wet' (dry)

		v		r
--	--	---	--	---

'at no time' (never)

l y

'on all occasions (always)

e l f l

'able to improve particular situation' (helpful)

k t l

'a container with a lid, handle and a spout, used for boiling water' (kettle)

i d l

'the part of something that is at an equal distance from all sides' (middle)

r r t i n

'change that makes something more accurate than it was before' (correction)

In this kind of scrabble, clues are provided in the form of the empty blocks and the meaning of the word.

In another type of scrabble, the meaning is not given. The empty blocks on the board have to be filled using the letters in the given words as in the following cases:

a e

'apple'

g p s

'grapes'

m n o

'mango'

r n e s

'oranges'

p a t s

'peanuts'

u a a s

'guavas'

o o u s

'coconuts'

a e m l n

'watermelon'

o a n

'woman'

o o l l

'football'

e o p e

'people'

Crossword Puzzle

After practising scrabble, the students are ready to solve simple crossword puzzles. In this game they have to fit words into spaces across and downwards in a square diagram. The level of the puzzle is determined by the level of the students and the stock of vocabulary they are supposed to have. Here is a simple puzzle.

1		A		E
2				
3				
4	E		E	
	1	2	3	4

Left to right

1. A story full of action. (tale)
3. To prepare something. (make)

Downwards

1. What is measured in minutes, hours, days and years? (time)
3. A large area of water that is surrounded by land. (lake)

Solution

T	A	L	E
I		A	
M	A	K	E
E		E	

Another puzzle

1			L	A	S			K
2			O			O		
3	M	O		T		R		S
4			T		L		S	S
5	S			O				
6	S		O	R	E			
7			R					
8				L	O		S	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Left to right

- Coming after all others in order (last)
- Greatest in amount or degree (most)
- Of lower mark or importance (less)
- A place where something is kept for future use (store)
- The state of no longer having something (loss)

Downwards

- That which cannot be recovered (lost)
- Spoken rather than written (oral)
- Pulled something apart into pieces (tore)
- To touch someone with the lips to express love (kiss)

Solution

1			L	A	S	T		K
2			O			O		I
3	M	O	S	T		R		S
4	I		T		L	E	S	S
5	S			O				
6	S	T	O	R	E			
7			R	A				
8				L	O	S	S	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Discovering Words

This is an interesting game in which the student has to guess the correct word. The teacher describes an entity and asks the students to name it. For instance, the teacher says,

A flexible container in which students carry textbooks, paper and other items to school is called _____; to which a student replies by saying *school bag*. Items familiar to the students can be described in this manner. For example:

- A book that teaches a particular subject and is used in school is a _____. (*textbook*)
- The work that is given by teachers to students to do at home is _____. (*homework*)
- A task that a teacher gives students to do as a part of studies is an _____. (*assignment*)
- A pen with a very small metal ball at its point and that rolls ink onto the paper is a _____. (*ball point pen*)

- A small piece of rubber that is used to remove the pencil mark from paper is an _____. (*an eraser*)
- An activity that needs physical effort or skill and is usually done in a special area according to fixed rules is a _____. (*sport*)
- A sport in which teams or individuals compete with each other is a _____. (*game*)
- A small meal that is usually taken in a hurry is a _____. (*snack/tiffin*)
- An electronic machine that can store, organise and find information, do calculations and can control other machines with its help is a _____. (*personal computer*)
- A short text that is written as a school exercise is a piece of _____. (*composition*)
- The act of speaking or reading so that one can write down the word is _____. (*dictation*)
- A period of teaching that involves a discussion between an individual student or a small group of students and a teacher is a _____. (*tutorial*)

Word Search

This is a game which consists of letters arranged in a square. The square contains several hidden words that a player has to find.

There are other word games as well which can be improvised and used.

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