

Force-Feeding Vocabulary

The question of vocabulary may have become our greatest concern with the students, and it appears to have got measurably more serious over the past five or six years. It slows their reading and it makes their writing sound infantile, even for those with perceptive minds.

Most of our students have proved excellent at memorizing words from lists--they've had eleven years of practice and know how to play the game. They devote one small area on their brain's hard disk to "vocabulary storage." It holds 20-25 words with a synonym for each. They score high on vocabulary quizzes. That's another game they play well. After the quiz, they replace the 25 old words with the 25 new words. And so it goes. The result of all this is that by the time they are graduated, they have acquired 25 new words, the ones for that final quiz, still sitting in that small space in their brain.

We've come to think that they are, as Mr Boffo says, 'not clear on the basic concept.' What has led us to that conclusion is that they make a distinction between the English they hear, speak, read, and write on one hand, and "vo-cab" on the other. The phrase that turns our blood cold is "SAT words." Students who use it are telling us that they are not adding these words to the vocabulary they use for communication; they are adding them to their Test Toolbox, and they do not see any connection between the two groups.

We spend a great deal of time feeding words to our students at all levels. They get used to our interrupting them, even come, they tell us, not to notice it any more. We "feed" them during private conversations, class discussions, and while they're talking with teammates (which is what ours do more than any other activity). We do it with literary terminology, but mostly just with everyday English. We do it to introduce them to words we suspect they do not know and to get them to be more specific with the words they do. With a new word, it might sound something like this:

Student: ...and then what she says might mean yes and it might mean no, and he gets all confused.
Teacher: ...and her ambiguous answer confuses him.
Student: Her ambiguous answer confuses him.

We've found it essential that the student repeat what the teacher says. At first some resist, and we have to tell them that they learn the words by hearing them echo in their own mouths and heads.

Student: ...and then what she says might mean yes and it might mean no, and he gets all confused.
T: Her ambiguous answer confuses him.
S: Yeah, whatever.
T: No, not whatever, Her ambiguous answer confuses him. Repeat that so that your mouth learns the word.
S: Her ambiguous answer confuses him.
T: Good!
S: She has this idea that she wants to give him to do but it, like, isn't probably going to work, you know?
T: Her suggestion seems impractical.
S: Her suggestion seems impractical.

We do it with literary terms as well:

S: The way she picks the words helps her meaning.
T: Her diction reinforces her meaning.
S: Her diction reinforces her meaning.

But often just to get them to use words they already know instead of others that are too vague:

S: So this thing she has about ...'
T: (interrupting) So this concern she has...
S: So this concern she has...

Rarely, we stop for a fast explanation...

S: But he's prejudice for lower class people.
T: He's prejudiced against lower class people. Prejudice is a noun, as in 'a prejudice is a preformed opinion.' The adjective you want here is 'prejudiced.' And it governs the prepositions 'against' and 'in favor of.' It's not a bad idea to be prejudiced against black widow spiders. Some might feel a referee is prejudiced in favor of the other team.
T: He's prejudiced against the lower classes.
S: He's prejudiced against the lower classes.
T: Exaggerate that 'D' on the end for me so that I can hear that you're saying it, OK?
S: He's prejudiceD against the lower classes.

When we do assign words, it's almost always from the reading, and we reinforce them orally in this same way, making the kids repeat them.

T: You have 90 seconds. Each one of you tell your teammates one thing you are apprehensive about. You must use the word apprehensive in your sentence. (Then we listen to see if any are misusing the word. We don't catch them all, but we try.)

It all takes time and alert ears, especially in classes of 30-40, and it keeps us moving around the room, but we find it helps.

S: So anyone could see through his lie.
T: His lie is transparent.
S: Yeah, whatever.
T: No, not whatever, His lie is transparent.

Sometimes it's sense discrimination we're after:

S: Laura is shy.
T: Do you mean she's timid or introverted or reclusive? Or something else?

We may stop here if the word is one we suspect most of the students don't use and we risk breaking the flow of a good discussion.