

## YES! VOCABULARY GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM

Michelle Kinsbursky (*kins@macam.ac.il*)

I would like to take you on a journey, the journey I traveled which led me to using vocabulary games when teaching college students academic reading; and as you will see, can be good for any age learner.

I wear two hats in the English Department at the Ohalo Teacher Training College in Katzrin. I teach both EAP courses (English for Academic Purposes) and courses for pre-service English teachers – one of which is “Songs and Games in the English Classroom.” Wearing this “second” hat is what helped me reach some of the discoveries about English reading instruction which I shared at this year’s Summer ETAI Conference.

The Talmud teaches

**Much I have learned from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but the most from my students.**

Over the years it had become more and more clear to me that one of the greatest stumbling blocks for students in EAP courses who seek to fulfill their English exemption requirement was a lack of a sufficient vocabulary when attempting to understand and deal with academic texts.

This lack of a richer, higher level vocabulary came up time and again as a primary area of difficulty – even in texts of high interest; and for many of the students, the most basic vocabulary was missing.

The students themselves would say things like:

“If I just had the vocabulary, I would be able to read the text more easily.”

“There are so many words I don’t know, I give up before I even start.”

Alan Maley, editor of the Resource Book for Teachers, states in the foreword to Morgan Rinvoluceri’s book, *Vocabulary*:

**... as any learner of a foreign language knows only too well, words are essential, and the lack of them leads to feelings of insecurity.**

I had diligently taught my students the use of context clues to aid in understanding words unknown to them, but found it was not a reliable method since many times there were no clues for unknown words or the students lacked so much vocabulary that the clues were of no use to them.

### **What the Research Says...**

My feelings were confirmed in 2000 when I heard Elisheva Barkon’s lecture at the Summer ETAI Conference on **Using Context to Infer Word Meaning**. She outlined six component skills and knowledge areas for reading taken from Laufer (1997) – one of which is called Vocabulary and Structural Knowledge.

Vocabulary Knowledge, she argued, is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension. Barkon stated that a Hebrew speaker with a strong English background comes to a text with a vocabulary size of about 3000 word families (in contrast to a native speaker of similar age who has a knowledge of about 18,000-20,000 word families – Nation, 1990).

It is estimated that such knowledge will enable 90 – 95% coverage of a text and will yield a minimum passing grade of 56% on a reading comprehension test. Each increase in 1,000 words would result in an increase of 7% on a reading comprehension test. This I found alarming for I was certain that most of my students did not even reach this lexical threshold.

Stressing the point, Barkon claimed that second language learners who possess 2000 word families understand only 80% of the text. Thus, 20% of the written text is not understandable – which means that 1 out of every 5 words is unknown. This supported what I myself had found – that many of my students lack so much vocabulary that trying to use context clues was an unsuccessful strategy for them.

McCarthy (1996) in his book, **Vocabulary**, discusses “nonexistent contextual clues”, “unusable contextual clues”, “misleading and partial clues”, and “suppressed clues” as factors that adversely affect the reader’s ability to guess accurately.

Even so... he argues that the most commonly used strategies for understanding vocabulary are “making guesses and inferences about new words.” But there are real differences between what strong and weak learners do.

McCarthy claims that guessing and inferring meaning is what the good learner does when having to deal with difficulty in reading... And we all know, that no matter what, the good learner will plunge ahead and get it... it’s the weaker and often the average learner that gets left behind!

Elisheva Barkon concluded her lecture by indicating that in teaching reading, students need to be instructed in good reading skills as well as be taught more words at a faster rate.

I began to de-emphasize using context clues for unknown words in texts and focused more on vocabulary development as a significant component for improving reading comprehension.

I did intensive work with vocabulary notebooks – but I found that most of my students (even with grade incentives) did not keep these conscientiously. Again, the good student did, the average and weaker student,

having so many other college demands, chose not to fulfill this requirement. They didn’t feel they gained enough for the time and effort it took – Israeli college students are very pragmatic!

This is where “my other hat” came in... little by little – very naturally – I began playing vocabulary games with my college students.

### **The Value of Game Playing...**

I teach my pre service English teachers that games do not have to be the “frosting on the cake” of an English lesson. Games can in fact be an integral part of their teaching for all the following reasons...

- Gives practice in any / all language skills
- Adds variety
- Motivates
- Renews student energy
- Involves students in a stimulating / painless way
- Encourages student participation
- Changes the role of the teacher and the learner
- Provides opportunities to use language in a less formal way
- Uses language creatively
- Offers a diagnostic tool
- Makes learning more memorable

### **The list goes on and on...**

Research indicates that **in order to learn vocabulary, words have to be recycled numerous times.** (I’ve heard anywhere from 6 to 25x !!!). Games are definitely an effective way to do this. In addition, the atmosphere in the classroom changes when games are added. In that EAP is a required course, it’s not one of these courses students run to joyfully! Games make it more inviting.

**And not the least of its values...** Using games in the lesson models an alternative way of teaching which fits right in with teacher training objectives for our pre-service teachers who are learning how to instruct in effective and creative ways to meet educational objectives and challenges.

### **Which Games?**

All the classic games are easily adapted to meet vocabulary needs for the college learner – or for any age learner for that matter! I’ve included game ideas at the end of this article (See page 38) – these are just a few of the many possibilities.

### **What are some of the problems or issues?**

#### **• Time**

Often teachers question if they have the time “to play” – but the gain is worth it. And the more frequently games are introduced into the lesson, the more adept the class

will be to fall into step with its rules and procedures without it taking too much time away from the rest of the lesson.

#### • Student's willingness

You may find that not all students are eager to play games, though it's not that common. But this you will have to determine with your own students. If students do not seem receptive, they may just need to be brought around – after it becomes a regular part of the lesson, the ice is broken and even the previously uncooperative will join in.

#### • Which words should be taught?

This of course is a very important question. The value of learning any given word has to do with frequency of use. Although there are something like 54,000 word families, 3,000 or so of high frequency words provide coverage of at least 95% of a text – that's a large number of words. There are various vocabulary lists / sites available. The site that I've become familiar with <http://www.lextutor.ca> and includes for my purposes an academic word list. When going into this site, you cut and paste your text into a vocabulary processor section and the site will do a statistical analysis of the frequency words and even lists the high frequency words.

But often, we know the words we want our students to learn. We know the curriculum and the kinds of words that are significant for developing better reading skills (eg. connectors) or the kind of vocabulary that will repeat itself in the texts that we read and therefore will

be worth their while to learn. In my case, words related to education and research will come up in many of the texts so I target these words.

#### In Closing

Remember learners at every age enjoy prizes. As an example, a few times in the semester we play BINGO when I like to recycle the vocabulary that has already been learned. I bring in a jar of gumballs for the winners (naturally everyone gets one at the end!). This of course is a big hit.

Well, the only thing left to be said, is I invite you try it and if you already use games on occasion, try using them regularly!

#### References

- Barkon, Elisheva. Using Context to Infer Word Meaning. Lecture at ETAI Summer Conference (2000).
- Laufer, B. (1997) The lexical plight in second language reading: Words you don't know, words you think you know and words you can't guess. In J. Coady & T. Huckin (Eds) *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition: A Rationale for Pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCarthy, Michael (1996). Vocabulary. In Candlin & Widdowson (eds.) *Language Teaching – A scheme for Teacher Education*. Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, John & Rinvuluceri, Mario (1990). Vocabulary. In Maley (ed.) *Resource Books for Teachers*. Oxford English: Oxford University Press

*Since receiving her Teaching Credential, Reading Specialist Credential and MA in Education from the University of California at Berkeley in the US, Michelle has been teaching learners of all ages. Michelle began teaching English when she came to Israel in 1984. For the last 12 years, she has been teaching EAP courses at various colleges in the north – Ohalo, Oranim, Tzemach, and Emek Yizrael. Ohalo College in Katzrin is her home base where she is also a teacher trainer in the English department.*