

Lexical Issues in the University ESL Writing Class

- This article addresses the important connections between lexical knowledge and second language writing. Based on a review of the literature, it enumerates the effects of limited lexical knowledge on student writing and presents evidence that immigrant students in college and university ESL writing programs are in particular need of strategies and tools for increasing their knowledge of vocabulary. In addition to outlining relevant goals for ESL lexical study, the author suggests a range of useful activities such as the use of learners' dictionaries and lexical journals, the integration of grammar and vocabulary study, and ways in which lexical issues can be foregrounded throughout the various stages of the writing process.

It is time to think about the important link between lexical knowledge and second language writing. ESL and mainstream writing classes at colleges and universities in California and nationwide are serving more and more students for whom English is a second language. In developing methodology and materials, ESL practitioners have looked carefully at the writing process and thoroughly debated many important questions including the appropriate roles of reading and grammar work in the ESL writing class (Byrd & Reid, 1998; Carson & Leki, 1993; Kroll, 1990; Leki, 1992; Reid, 1993). One still-neglected element essential for the second language writer is vocabulary. What do we know about the importance of lexical knowledge for successful writing and about its place in the writing curriculum?

In research on vocabulary acquisition (Coady, 1997b; Coady & Huckin, 1997; Ellis, 1994; Hatch & Brown, 1995; Huckin, Haynes & Coady, 1993; Krashen, 1993; Parry, 1991), the predominant focus is on

issues of input such as the important connections between vocabulary acquisition and reading or listening. Production of vocabulary in speaking and writing is often described as a “later” and more demanding step along the continuum of acquiring a word (Gass, 1988), but specific strategies for mastering vocabulary for writing have not been explored as fully as have more general strategies for learning new words and remembering them (see Schmitt, 1998 for a comprehensive list of strategies). For example, in Nation’s classic *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary* (1990), thirty pages are devoted to reading whereas a scant eleven pages are devoted to writing (two of which discuss spelling). In part, this imbalance may be explained by an assumption that instruction in vocabulary is most necessary for beginners and that later vocabulary learning derives almost exclusively from “context” (Coady, 1997a; Krashen, 1993).

When teaching writing, particularly when working with relatively advanced students of English, teachers may assume that vocabulary study is going on independently (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994); however, many writing instructors in college-level ESL programs feel that students who test into such programs typically have limited lexical resources and often have not learned essential academic vocabulary well enough to use it effectively in writing. These same students may not possess useful strategies for learning more about words and how to use them. Recent documentation of the problems of immigrant students in writing programs suggests that their word-study strategies need to be improved. Scarcella (1996) reports that students from the University of California Irvine, for example, show marked limitations in their knowledge of basic academic words and that their writing includes many confusions such as “acoustic approximations” (p. 131), word form errors, inappropriate use of words from the oral register, and misuse of many other lexical items.¹ A similar report from the University of California Davis describes confusions between similar words or forms, preposition errors, and markedly poor control of abstract language (Lange & ter Haar, 1997).

How important an issue is vocabulary learning for the ESL writing student at the college level? ESL writers themselves, including students who have successfully completed English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or ESL programs, emphasize that increased vocabulary knowledge is an ongoing need (Leki & Carson, 1994), and an earlier study shows that many students believe vocabulary errors are the most serious of all the error types (Politzer, 1978 as cited in Gass, 1988). This latter idea is supported in the literature, which suggests that lexical errors can disrupt meaning for a reader far more drastically than grammatical errors (Gass, 1988; Widdowson, 1978 as cited in Zimmerman, 1997b). Gass suggests, for example, that a phonologically based vocabulary error, such as using the word *tragedies*

instead of *strategies*, may seriously cloud meaning while a sentence containing morphological errors may still be clear even though it is not correct. University faculty agree with Gass's point as shown in the Santos study (1988) in which instructors from the physical sciences and humanities/social sciences rated lexical errors as the most unacceptable of writing errors in ESL essays.

Recent literature on teaching writing to second language students does not provide much guidance for the treatment of lexical issues in the writing classroom. Looking as an example at Reid's (1993) *Teaching ESL Writing*, one finds no direct references to vocabulary instruction in the writing class despite the fact that Reid includes vocabulary as a grading criterion in several sample essay evaluation scales and mentions that writers need a broader range of vocabulary than speakers do. Reid's omission can undoubtedly be understood as part of the move away from viewing writing classes as special types of language classes and toward viewing them as "writing based" and devoted to "the study of composition techniques and strategies" (p. 29).

In a process-oriented classroom, word choice, along with grammar and syntax errors, may be relegated to the editing stage of the process. For instance, White and Arndt suggest in their book *Process Writing* that using a dictionary to make vocabulary corrections is a step that should occur at the very end of the writing process (cited in Scholfield, 1998). Similarly, "error awareness" approaches to sentence level issues in writing² may include word choice as an error type and depend on the student to correct such errors when editing. However, at least two major problems arise when considering vocabulary primarily as an editing issue. First, marking "ww/wrong word" or "wc/word choice" is not likely to suggest a strategy for correction to the ESL student. Consulting an English/English dictionary about a word choice error may not be possible since the only word to look up may be the one which has already been flagged as incorrect. Thus, the correction of the vocabulary error may not occur. Second, words affect the quality of writing and the clarity of students' ideas much earlier in the writing process than an editing approach might suggest. The real goal of a vocabulary emphasis should be the ability to generate writing, not just to correct it.

Eloquent acknowledgment of the importance of vocabulary development in the writing classroom can be found, for example, in Raimes (1985), who states that we need to let students take advantage of the "extraordinary generative power of language" and offer them "what is always in short supply in the writing classroom—time...for attention to vocabulary" (p. 248). Raimes believes that many of the activities in the writing classroom will help students learn vocabulary. She maintains that "what the less proficient writ-

ers need, compared with unskilled L1 writers is...more opportunity to talk, listen, read and write in order to marshal the vocabulary they need to make their own background knowledge accessible to them in their L2" (p. 250).

In fact, it can be shown that limited lexical knowledge profoundly affects second language academic writing in a variety of ways. In the most general sense, holistic evaluation of writing has been shown to correlate positively with measures of lexical richness and variety, adjusted for error (Engber, 1995; Laufer & Nation, 1995). Thus, limited vocabulary can result in disappointing evaluations. More specifically, a number of effects on the writing process can be seen. Krapels (1990) found that some students who lacked sufficient vocabulary resorted to their L1 as part of their writing process. Up to a point, the technique of using L1 vocabulary in the earliest drafts may be beneficial as it helps students keep the flow of the composing process going. Less desirable is the effect of limited vocabulary on ESL students' rate of writing; they draft very slowly as they search for the right word to express what they are thinking (Leki & Carson, 1994; Raimes, 1985), leading in many cases to serious problems in timed writing situations. Limited vocabulary may also lead to "avoidance" of complex ideas for fear of being unable to express these ideas (Scholfield, 1998 discusses this tendency in EFL students). Spack (1984) has even proposed that students may be severely hampered in invention strategies if they do not have the vocabulary knowledge to explore freely amongst ideas for a topic in their L2.

Other outcomes of limited vocabulary are less well documented but well known to classroom teachers. Some students with weak vocabulary skills may closely paraphrase or directly and sometimes extensively "lift" from reading passages, using words and phrases in the passage that the students seem to feel will express what they want to say better than they could express it themselves. Another familiar consequence of a small vocabulary is that students may write "primer prose" (short choppy sentences with markedly poor coherence) or, conversely and somewhat ironically, may ramble and become wordy as they put together many simple words, when one would do—if only that one word were known! In some cases, the student who wants a larger vocabulary resorts to wholesale use of a thesaurus and, without the needed follow-up in a dictionary to check exact meaning and usage, may write unclear if not bizarre sentences.³ Finally, with or without the sometimes helpful, often harmful thesaurus, the L2 student with limited word knowledge will write sentences that at best may be non-idiomatic or, worse, may violate grammatical restrictions on word usage (e.g., "I satisfy my appearance" or "I suggest you to look up the dictionary").

Teachers of second language writing may rightly feel overwhelmed and discouraged at the prospect of teaching vocabulary. It is well known that the intentional teaching of individual words cannot begin to meet students' needs. Even ten new words per day could not come close to giving students a recognition vocabulary of the size that L1 high school students are said to possess, i.e., between 25,000 and 50,000 different words (Nagy & Anderson, 1982).

Moreover, writing teachers realize that learning a word well enough to use it in writing is a complex task, requiring not just one but repeated exposures to the word in reading or listening (Meara, 1980; Nagy, Herman & Anderson, 1985; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Sternberg, 1983). Beyond that, "knowing" a word for writing demands knowledge of many aspects of that word. The concept of a "word-knowledge framework" has proved useful for testing, teaching, and research (Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 1995; Schmitt & Meara, 1997). According to such a framework, "knowing" a word (i.e., gaining something like native-speaker competence) includes at least the following:

1. understanding the word's denotation or meaning (possibly multiple meanings associated with the same spelling)
2. knowing the word's part of speech
3. knowing its frequency
4. understanding its register (formal or informal? appropriate in academic writing? used only by grandparents and small children? in harmony with the diction used in the rest of the student's writing?)
5. knowing its collocations (What other words commonly occur with it? In what common phrases or "chunks" does it occur?)
6. controlling its grammar (How does it work in sentences? Is it countable, uncountable, transitive, causative, reflexive? Can it have both animate and inanimate subjects? Etc.)
7. knowing its connotations (favorable or unfavorable?)
8. being able to make native-like associations with it (other words or concepts that a word will suggest)
9. understanding shades of the word's meaning (literal and figurative, concrete and abstract uses, etc.)
10. knowing its derivations (other members of the word's family and affixes that can be used with the stem of the word)
11. knowing its spelling
12. knowing its pronunciation.

(List adapted from Nation, 1990)

Under this expanded definition of “knowing” a word, a wide range of student error in writing can be seen as vocabulary based, and this range includes much more than the simple cases of wrong word choice. For example, a sentence such as “She frightened the high cliffs of the Grand Canyon” could be analyzed as containing a “grammar” problem involving omission of the copula or mixing active and passive. However, from the learner’s point of view it might be more useful to suggest that the student needs to learn more about the verb *frighten* and the adjective *frightened* and the grammatical structures that they appear in.

It is also clear from the foregoing expanded definition of “knowing” a word that vocabulary acquisition must be seen as “incremental” (Schmitt, 1995) or as progressing along a continuum (Gass, 1988). Thus, even though a student may identify a specific word as “known,” there are often many aspects of word knowledge that the student needs to master before the word can be used correctly and effectively in writing (Schmitt & Meara, 1997). Again, this is daunting to the teacher, who will need to devise ways to enhance the incremental acquisition of word knowledge and/or teach advanced students strategies that will help them to independently learn more about the words they use in writing.

Our weakest ESL students, including many of the immigrant students mentioned above, will benefit from a focus on vocabulary and the development of vocabulary acquisition strategies. These students, who have acquired English largely through incidental learning in social rather than academic situations and who may spend the majority of their time with family and peers who speak their L1, have been exposed to the relatively narrow range of words of the informal spoken register plus, in some cases, the interlanguage of their L1 peers (Leki, 1992; Scarcella, 1996). As a result, these language acquirers may seem more limited in the writing class even though they are more fluent than most of their international peers, who usually learn English by reading, rule learning, and vocabulary study. Anecdotally, conversations with immigrant students at UC Davis reveal that many of the weaker language acquirers do not have specific strategies for using the lexical tools available to them; these conversations also reveal that, in their drive to reduce the number of errors in their writing, many of them avoid the risk-taking that experimentation with new vocabulary requires.

It is clear that the university writing teacher cannot begin to provide the direct instruction needed to fill the gap outlined above. However, the writing class does provide a powerful context that can interest students in learning words, train them to ask questions, and help them to develop lexical strategies.

Ways to Achieve a Lexical Focus in a Writing Class

If students in ESL writing classes at the university—advanced students by most definitions—are to be made aware of the importance of expanding their word knowledge, a focus on lexical issues must be established and maintained by the writing instructor; and within the writing curriculum, clear connections must be forged between reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Students must come to realize that the right kind of vocabulary study will not only enhance their reading comprehension but also contribute to their ability to discuss concepts in their writing. At the same time, their accuracy in writing will be enhanced by a growing understanding of the ways in which grammar and lexicon interact and by a growing ability to make use of the reference tools available to them to find information about correct usage.

The typical syllabus refers to writing, reading, and grammar assignments. Where does vocabulary fit in? If vocabulary is to become important to students, they must come to see it as an element integral to their work in each of these areas. This will not happen automatically. Even requiring students to buy a vocabulary textbook or a learners' dictionary does not guarantee that fruitful vocabulary study will occur. Rather, the writing instructor must be committed to foregrounding lexical issues as often as possible in instruction and via specific assignments. The ensuing sections of this article outline various approaches used in some ESL writing classes for undergraduates at the University of California Davis. In this program, incidentally, over 90% of the students fall into the resident immigrant category.

A Place for Vocabulary in Course Goals

Instructors will wish to consider their own goals and objectives for vocabulary study. Such goals and objectives may be presented to the students directly and included in the syllabus. In light of the research summarized above, valuable goals for instructors to consider include:

1. leading students to understand the importance of the intentional study of vocabulary for becoming a good writer
2. suggesting strategies for independent study that students can tailor to their own learning styles and preferences (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994)
3. individualizing vocabulary study by tying it to the students' own writing
4. providing guided practice with a learner's dictionary and alerting students to both the kind of information it contains and the pitfalls inherent in using one (Nesi & Meara, 1994), thus enabling students to use this tool to its full potential

5. familiarizing students with a selected body of academic vocabulary that will be useful in writing for various content area classes
6. providing a response mechanism for instructor feedback, instructor/student dialog, and answers to students' questions about words

If the instructors give out a syllabus on the first day, and that syllabus contains course goals, some of the above goals can be included and highlighted in the first class discussion. For example, if during the first class period the instructors ask students to skim the syllabus to find answers to specific questions, they could include a question that is related to vocabulary (e.g., "When is the first assignment related to vocabulary due?"). It is helpful for the instructors to share a bit of their knowledge of the research related to vocabulary or to advance a hypothesis about the importance of lexical knowledge for writing. The words *syllabus* and *hypothesis* can be presented, moreover, as two important academic terms for ESL students to know.

Given the constraints of time in a writing class, individual instructors may or may not actually include specific vocabulary lessons in the syllabus; however, the above course goals can be carried out in the context of several of the assignments and approaches detailed in the sections below.

The Dictionary Exercise

Assuming that students are required or strongly advised to purchase a learners' dictionary,⁴ a first-day assignment that requires students to use the dictionary and explore its format and its "help" sections can reap rewards later in the semester or quarter. Recent investigation of how students actually use learners' dictionaries has revealed that students generally underuse these excellent resources or use them in traditional ways—such as checking spelling or looking up the definitions of unknown words. In spite of the fact that learners' dictionaries use a controlled defining vocabulary (usually of the most frequently used 2000 words), significant misreading of definitions often occurs (Nesi & Meara, 1994; Zimmerman, 1997a). For example, Nesi and Meara give many examples of the so-called "kidrule," by which the student sees a familiar word in a dictionary definition, interprets that as a synonym for the target word, and performs a simple substitution, such as "We must *intersect* the river..." based on the definition: "intersect: divide (sth) by *going across* it" (p. 9). Thus, a learners' dictionary assignment and class discussion of such an assignment can be valuable not only for orienting students to the dictionary and familiarizing them with the codes and terminology used but also for warning them of possible pitfalls in dictionary use. (Some publishers provide workbooks to supplement their dictio-

nary, but such workbooks should be carefully examined by the instructor for the academic focus needed by university writing students.)

A dictionary exercise should require students to survey and sample. It should require them to find useful tables, lists, and sets of directions and to apply what they find to words or sentences of their own. For instance:

- a. What does *phr v* stand for? Give several examples of a *phr v*. Include at least one that is not on the list of examples on p. xviii.
- b. From the table on word formation, list four suffixes that can be added to a word stem to create a noun. Give examples of your own of one word for each suffix.
- c. What do the grammar codes [C] and [U] stand for? Give an example of a familiar noun that has the label [U] in the dictionary.

More importantly, the dictionary exercise should have a section in which students look up designated words and answer questions about them. The instructor can choose sample words that will be immediately useful in the first writing assignment and/or words that are particularly useful for academic writing. It is helpful to choose words with more than one definition, one of which is clearly more likely to be useful in the academic context. *Strategy*, for instance, occurs in military usage as well as in an abstract, uncountable use of *talking strategy*, but students are more likely to use the word in its countable sense of “a *strategy* for ____ing something.”

It is also wise to include in this section a verb that governs one of the major patterns of complementation so that students see the abbreviations used for such patterns. The entry for *enable*, for example, will provide an encounter with the boldface code “**enable sb to do sth**” and students can be asked to decipher the meaning of that code.

Finally, establishing the importance of studying example sentences is one of the most important elements in the dictionary orientation. One can share with students the research demonstrating that dictionary users who analyzed sample sentences made fewer errors than those who used dictionaries in other ways (Christianson, 1997). A sample sequence follows:

Look up the noun *strategy*.

1. Which of the three definitions is likely to have an academic use?

2. Are you more likely to use the word *strategy* in a countable [C] or an uncountable [U] sense? _____
3. Application question: Should there be an article in the following sentence? Fill in the blank or write “Ø”
I need _____ new strategy for learning chemistry formulas.
4. Look at the example sentence in #3. What preposition is usually used after *strategy*? _____
 What verb form follows this preposition? _____
5. In the dictionary entry, find an example sentence that illustrates the word *strategy* in its countable [C] sense. Copy the sentence here:

6. Follow the pattern in #3 or #5 to write your own (funny or serious) example sentence to help you remember this information about using the word *strategy*.

Finally, the dictionary exercise can be linked to the first reading or writing assignment by asking students to pick a key word from that assignment and provide the kind of information exemplified by the previous questions.

The Journal

A lexical journal can be another way of highlighting word study in the writing class. A journal assignment can take many forms and is the ideal means by which to individualize vocabulary study and to link such study closely with the students’ own writing. In the lexical journal, students can do follow-up work on lexical issues that arise in their own essays, drafts, or reading journals. Lexical journals put the burden of responsibility for choice on the students and remove teachers from the role of choosing and presenting words to the entire class except as they choose to do in response to themes of writing or reading assignments (see below). Journals can also provide students with further practice in using their learners’ dictionaries and give the instructor a mechanism for dialog with the students that, if handled efficiently, is not overly time consuming.

Lexical journals can involve any kind of vocabulary study material the instructor deems useful for extending word knowledge: dictionary work, association between new and previously known words, collocational studies,

analysis of stems and affixes, semantic analysis, comparison of similar words, or even visual reinforcement (list based on Sökmen, 1998). Appendix 1 provides a sample lexical journal assignment from an advanced ESL writing class. This particular approach is focused on dictionary work and is linked to the students' own writing. To summarize the salient points of the assignment:

Step 1: Identifying Words

Students are asked to work on words that are “starred” or otherwise marked in any of their returned writing including essays, early drafts of essays, or reading journals. Such marking takes no longer than marking the word with an abbreviation such as *ww* or *wc*. A slightly more complicated method is setting up pairs of words for students to compare in their journals. Pairing can be done by placing a star by the wrong word (e.g., *grow up*) and suggesting a more appropriate word choice in the margin (“Compare: *grow up*, *raise*”). This marking method takes no longer than writing a vocabulary correction or suggestion over the students' errors but gives students work to do in the journal, as opposed to giving a correction which they may never think about actively. Nevertheless, students perceive the comparison of seemingly “close” words and of words easily confused as valuable (see section below on evaluation). Examples of commonly confused pairs of words taken from student work include *accused of* instead of *mistaken for*, *against* (used as a verb) instead of *oppose*, and *happy* instead of *pleasant*.

Once students begin receiving written work back from the instructor, they usually have more than enough words for their journal assignments and, in fact, can make choices that are more appropriate. Students who do not make vocabulary or usage errors may need an alternative assignment.

Step 2: Looking up the Words in a Learners' Dictionary

Students using a standard college dictionary generally will not be able to do the assignment correctly due to the lack of example sentences in such dictionaries. In looking up their words, students should be directed to choose the meaning (through the definition) that corresponds to the meaning they intended when writing. This step may be quite challenging to them.

Step 3: Recording Information

Students record certain information about the pair of words in their journals. Writing the definition may or may not be useful. Perceived useful-

ness seems to vary from student to student. If students are comparing pairs of words, definitions do play a more useful role than when they are working on a single word. In addition, it is very valuable for writing students to record both grammatical information about the way the word functions in sentences and information related to frequency and register. Copying an example sentence from the learners' dictionary should also be required, but a link needs to be made between the sentence copied and the grammatical or stylistic information recorded. For example, the student could label or circle important structural elements in the example sentence. This is a crucial point and may mark the difference between a student who does the assignment mechanically and a student who uses the assignment as a real opportunity for learning.

Finally, the standard practice of having students create their own example sentence deserves several comments. Using the dictionary's example sentence as a pattern is one practice that may minimize the creation of bizarre sentences through mechanical substitution (where, for example, *lurk=hide*, thus "The dog *lurked* the bone in the garden"). Linking the student's example sentence to the original error may also be an effective way of showing the student the relevance of the exercise. Either way, further instructor feedback and further correction are often needed on student-generated sentences.

Finally, it is important to invite students to write questions they may still have about the word and any aspect of its use. Often students who seldom speak in class will ask penetrating questions regarding words that they are wondering about in their journals.

Step 4: Dialog

Instructor feedback to journal entries is needed in a few areas. Clearly, teachers will want to answer, whether in writing or during a conference, any questions that students raise in the journal. It is also important to respond in cases in which the student has chosen a different meaning of the word than the one called for in the original context; in such cases, the student may be required to do a new journal entry. Teachers may also wish to comment on or to ask for corrections to mixed parts of speech or usage errors in student-generated sentences. This way, a dialog can be set up between the student and the teacher as the journal is returned and resubmitted. If the journal is set up as in Appendix 1, the instructor can use the right-hand column as space for these and other comments. Comments can vary in length and directiveness; for instance, the instructor could write a simple "try again" message in response to an incorrect sentence or could start the student off on a correct pattern by providing a sentence beginning. In any case, the teacher should be careful

not to take too much responsibility in the lexical journal dialog. Sending the student back to a dictionary or making the student think more about a word can foster independent learning habits, which may result in the student learning more (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995).

Reading and responding to journal entries can be done quickly; however instructors of large classes may not be able to give timely or extended feedback. In such cases, instructors may choose to check for accuracy in a more general manner or may be able to save time by giving uniform journal assignments to the whole class. Follow-up discussion time will be needed in class.

Experience using lexical journals has shown that the scope of what students actually do in their journals varies greatly with student motivation. The number of items in a student's journal may also depend on how many items the instructor has found and starred in the student's writing. An ambitious journal entry might be typified by the following: In one assignment a student looked at the words *danger*, *(be) in danger*, and *dangerous*. She then figured out through her study of these words why it was incorrect for her to write, as she had originally written, "I feel *dangerous*." Next she compared *against* (which she had used as a verb) with the more appropriate verb *resist*. She also wrote a report about the lexical item *expose*, and compared the two words *property* and *possessions*. This student not only copied definitions out of the dictionary but also tried to explain the differences between these items in her own words. She was then able to write appropriate sentences of her own based on the sample sentences in her learners' dictionary.

Lexical Focus in Reading/Writing Assignments

As a writing class settles into the usual rhythm of discussing readings, pre-writing, drafting, response, revision, and editing, the lexical focus can easily slip into the background or become "relegated" to the lexical journal. However, in order for students to see the close connections between lexicon and accurate and effective writing, additional efforts must be made to foreground the lexical approach in each assignment.

In the section that follows, the assumption is that much or most university-level writing is done in response to some text; hence, reading is seen as part of the writing process. In general, experienced instructors will know that each reading and writing assignment revolves around a certain essential core of vocabulary. Training students to identify that core of vocabulary and to seek out further information about it will not only increase their knowledge of lexis but will also give them an opportunity to use this core vocabulary effectively in their essays. The lexical focus can be called forth at almost every step in the reading/writing process, as illustrated below.

Pre-reading

Lexical items from a title may be addressed in class (e.g., *Tracking*, the title of an excerpt from Mike Rose's 1996 *Lives on the Boundary*) or assigned as a word study in the vocabulary journal (e.g., *Wilderness* from the title of a 1995 Ken Chowder passage on use versus conservation of resources). Pre-reading discussion or assignments may provide the first opportunity for students to think about the core vocabulary, its usage, and its related forms. Any lexical item that will be important in the reading passage may also be defined and/or discussed as part of schema building before students read the assignment.

Reading and Annotating

Students may be encouraged to mark unknown vocabulary quickly while reading and to prioritize and look up vocabulary later. As a part of annotating a reading passage, students may be asked to make a note in the margin of key words that they predict will be useful in writing about the passage. Such key words are usually different from those words glossed for reading comprehension.⁵ (See also the section below on student strategy training.)

Discussions and Discussion Guides

A good lead-off question for small group discussion of a reading can be a question about important vocabulary, particularly if it involves discussing distinctions between concepts that are important in the passage. For example, after students read an article about the theory of multiple intelligences (e.g., Goleman, Kaufmann, & Ray, 1995), small groups might be asked to discuss similarities and differences between words such as *intelligence*, *talent*, *creativity*, *ability*, and *knowledge*. The instructor may bring a learners' dictionary to class or ask for volunteers to do so. This activity amounts to an exploration of a semantic field. During class discussions, unexpected opportunities for impromptu vocabulary mini-lessons often arise as mistakes in usage of important vocabulary occur. Experienced instructors will be able to decide when a comment on vocabulary will help prepare students for writing without unduly interrupting the flow of discussion.

Pre-writing

If the students' free writing or reading journals are turned in, it may be appropriate and useful to mark lexical gaps or confusions in these pre-writing explorations. Such feedback may be particularly important when students are preparing for an in-class writing. This process is much different,

of course, from “correcting” journals. On the other hand, if students engage in clustering or other brainstorming exercises, more abstract vocabulary may be needed for labeling or giving a title to lists or clusters and moving from there into topic sentences.

Feedback on Early Drafts

It has been shown that writing teachers make fewer comments, positive or negative, on lexical choices than on grammatical choices in journals, drafts, or essays (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). In drafts, it is helpful to: (a) praise students for good word choice decisions and/or for skillful or effective use of vocabulary in the draft (“Good word!” “Well stated!” or a smiley face), (b) mark problem vocabulary for individual students to look up and report on in their lexical journals, (c) suggest a range of words that could help students to develop their discussion or discuss it in a more academic style, and (d) follow up in class on vocabulary that was problematic for many or most students, again expanding choices.⁶

Paper Conferences

Suggestions (a) through (d) above applied to feedback on drafts may also be carried out in individual writing conferences. In suggesting a range of words, it is helpful to have students write the word themselves for practice and awareness of spelling. Prepositions should be provided along with the verbs.

Final Papers or Portfolios

Instructors or programs should be sure that word choice is addressed in the grading rubric. Positive descriptors might read, for instance, “accurate and varied word choice” for an “A” paper and “clear but sometimes non-idiomatic word choice” for a “B” paper. Descriptors corresponding to lower grades might include “frequently inaccurate and unclear word choice” or “limited vocabulary.” If vocabulary is emphasized in a writing class, it is logical for students to expect that end comments and marginal comments will include references to use of vocabulary in the paper.

Student Strategy Training

In order to teach students independence and intentionality in researching vocabulary for writing, instructors can expand upon the approach mentioned above in the section on reading and annotating. Experienced ESL writing teachers developing a reading/writing assignment will almost certainly be able to predict from the reading passage some of the key words that

are essential for writing the assignment. However, it is not always as certain that students themselves will be able to identify such key vocabulary; nor is it clear that they can systematically ask the questions needed for learning enough about the meaning, usage, and syntactic behavior of the words to use them accurately and effectively in their essays. Thus, rather than the teacher pointing out vocabulary to the students, it is useful to carry out training in the identification and research of key words in the ESL writing class.⁷

The goal of such training is that students will be able to identify fields and families of vocabulary and use such fields and families to explore ideas for writing. Student training should begin during discussion of the first reading/writing assignment. The instructor models the choice of two or three key words and their word “families.” For instance, *advertise*, *advertising* (uncountable) and *advertisement* (in the concrete, countable sense) could constitute one such “family” drawn from a reading by Jeffrey Schrank called *Psychosell* (1996). Here, both *product* and *need* in all of their related forms might be semantically related words to discuss. (Note: these are not words that the students would normally need to look up because they are considered already “known” to most students.) Through class discussion and examination of dictionary entries and sample sentences, students explore the conceptual differences between these related words as well as the syntactic behavior of each and apply what they learn when writing their essays.

On the next reading/writing assignment, more responsibility is given to the students, who are asked as part of their reading and annotation assignment to identify and bring to class three to five words from the reading that they feel will be important to their writing of the next assignment. On their first independent try, students will typically pick out words they do not know; these words, though interesting, are unlikely to be useful in, let alone essential to writing their essay. This can be brought out in class discussion. The instructor can then model the more basic key words and show their importance and the pitfalls in their usage. On subsequent reading/writing assignments, students may improve in their ability to identify and to ask relevant questions regarding key vocabulary.

This technique can contribute to better student writing in several ways. One benefit of this approach, particularly if the instructor is able to make useful links from the vocabulary to the discussion of concepts, is that the students will see that word study can help them to brainstorm ideas for writing. In the example above, discussion of the words *advertisement* and *advertising* can help students move from the concrete advertisement—what they see or hear—to consideration of the more abstract concepts of advertising, such as its philosophy of psychological manipulation. A second benefit of this approach is that the key vocabulary will be reinforced and usage

will be studied in depth so that differences in countability, number, and use of determiners with the two nouns will be illustrated. The class can then examine the use of the word *advertising* in noun compounds such as *advertising philosophy* or *advertising campaign*. Finally, strategy training in the identification of key words will assist students in future reading and writing assignments, both in the ESL writing class and beyond.

Points of Connection between Grammar and Vocabulary

Turning finally to sentence level instruction, insofar as grammar is explicitly taught in the writing classroom, a vocabulary focus can be important in helping students to understand the complexity of some grammatical points. These are areas where lexical considerations intersect with grammar in determining correct form or usage, i.e., areas that students may find very unpredictable as a result of this intersection. Some of the major grammatical areas that have such a lexical connection are: verb complementation and sentence structure after specific verbs, choice of prepositions, number and choice of articles and other determiners, passive voice, and word form. When dealing with errors in these areas of grammar, ESL writing students often find it reassuring to hear that there is usually no simple grammar “rule” that they have broken; rather, they are working in the relatively arbitrary realm of the lexicon.

As Hunston, Francis & Manning (1997) have stated, grammar and vocabulary are often seen as discrete areas of language learning, whereas in fact they interact in many places. These authors refer to the “grammar of individual words” (especially verbs) in discussing the area of verb complementation and preposition choice (p. 208). They argue that far more details of complementation than just the governance of infinitive or gerund can be taught as “patterns” and that the patterns are related to meanings. They further claim that teaching semantically based patterns will encourage better understanding and greater “accuracy and fluency” than the traditional memorization of lists. Basing their examples on their research of the *COBUILD* corpus, they illustrate several verb patterns (specifically “V by ____ING” and “V at n”) and the meanings associated with them.⁸ While admitting that the approach may seem to add complexity at first, the authors maintain that seeing the patterns themselves as adding meaning and treating them as “building blocks” of sentences can be very beneficial to students.

The important point here is not whether the syllabus of a writing class has space for teaching the numerous patterns suggested by Hunston et al. (1997), but rather that students should learn the principle: *Knowing verb complementation or verb-preposition patterns or even allowable structures after certain verbs is part of knowing the verb itself, and this kind of information can-*

not be learned by reference to a simple rule. Students should know (and the teacher should inform them) that the correct verb complement, preposition, or allowable sentence structure can be found in a learners' dictionary if one learns to read the grammar codes or uses the sample sentences as a source of grammatical information. In fact, one of the most reliable uses of a learners' dictionary is for finding correct prepositions, which are often indicated in bold face and appear in sample sentences (Christianson, 1997). Personal experience suggests that it may also be necessary to remind students that after a preposition error is made in writing, the correct move is not to look up the preposition itself but the word associated with it, usually the preceding but occasionally the following word. For example, students should look up *reason* to correct the preposition error in "the reason of _____" as well as the error in "by this reason."

Grammar lessons on article and number also certainly will include reference to lexical issues. Countability, for example, is word based; students cannot learn a simple grammatical rule for which nouns are countable and which are not (though knowing some general categories is useful). Thus, the correct use of articles and number will depend on a combination of word-governed and rule-governed principles since countability will determine whether a noun can be pluralized and which determiners can be used with it. Furthermore, students need to know that a large number of the nouns they need for academic writing are listed in dictionaries as both countable and uncountable, depending in part upon whether they are used in a concrete or an abstract sense (e.g., *competition* in university classes versus *a gymnastics competition* held at a specific time and place). Extensive contextualized practice and opportunities to ask questions about articles as used in the writing of native speaker authors are needed in order for students to begin to ask the right questions, let alone make the correct choices. However, an understanding of the lexical complexity involved seems to comfort students and helps them cope with and understand the notion that an absolutely right or wrong answer may not always exist.

It is perhaps somewhat less obvious that lexical issues enter into instruction in both active and passive voice. Typically, our initial teaching is based on simple examples in which the agent and object are clearly differentiated; this occurs because the concept that the verb represents is very concrete and the verb is of high frequency. So it is easy to believe that the grammatical principle is clear when students can correctly generate "The ball was thrown at a speed of 96 miles per hour" as well as "The pitcher threw a rising fast ball." However, when students write that they "were grown up in a rural area of mainland China," marking the error as "passive" may not be helpful. What is at issue in this case is a lexical difference between *grow up* and *raise*—and, to

complicate the picture even further, *grow*. The more abstract the concept, the less fair it is to the students simply to expect them to learn that a sentence should be expressed through a passive voice verb. Try, for example, to think through the difference between (active voice) *consists of* and (passive voice) *is made up of*. Again, judicious use of example sentences and guidance in looking up and understanding troublesome distinctions should be part of writing instruction. (See Appendix 2 for a worksheet on active and passive voice.)

Finally, word form or part of speech is an important area in which vocabulary plays a critical role. In this case, students can learn affixes that typically occur in various parts of speech; they can also learn the rules for identifying nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in sentences. However, further word study is still required for students to understand word form errors such as “He will success in school” since they often cannot distinguish noun from verb forms (in this case *success* from *succeed*). Individualized work on such troublesome word families can be assigned for students’ lexical journals.

Not only students but also tutors and instructors can be helped by recognizing ways in which grammar and vocabulary interact. Ultimately, the foregoing are all areas in which errors are difficult to explain. Whereas rule-governed areas such as tense and formation of the finite verb should never be considered random, lexically based restrictions can, in a way, be seen as more arbitrary. Students still may wish to ask why a noun such as *information* is uncountable or why we say *as a result* rather than *as the result*. We can legitimately dodge this question and instead urge students to learn the pattern or the “chunk” of language that it represents and also to find strategies for learning such chunks most effectively.

Evaluation

To evaluate the suggestions put forward in this article, five criteria for an approach to vocabulary teaching based on the research suggested by Oxford & Scarcella (1994) are helpful.

1. Is the approach based on what the students need to know?

The intent of all the suggestions mentioned here is to find what is relevant to improving student writing. As such, the approach seems by definition to address what ESL writing students need to know. The lexical journal, in particular, focuses on words that students have attempted to use in their writing but have used incorrectly, thus most clearly fulfilling this first criterion of need. It should be clear, though, that the guiding philosophy throughout the article has been that students need, in general, to know more about words they may already “know” at some level but do not know well enough to use effectively in their writing.

2. Is the approach tailored to individual learning styles and needs?

Insofar as vocabulary learning is approached in this article from many different angles, this criterion may indeed be fulfilled. A great deal of variety and latitude is implied in the discussion above of the many ways vocabulary can be foregrounded within the writing process. Within this approach, in-class discussions, group work, and illustrations can help the aural or visual learner to pick up information, as can multimedia practice materials in a language lab setting.

Certainly using the dictionary, as in the lexical journal assignment, does not fit every student's learning style. Perhaps some students could be given latitude to use native speaker informants to acquire a bank of sample sentences for this assignment. It is worth noting, however, that (based on my own teaching experience), the rather traditional lexical journal assignment has been shown to give a voice to several ESL students with special needs who never or seldom asked questions in class, including several students with impaired hearing and markedly unclear speech.

3. Is the practice of vocabulary contextualized?

Grounding vocabulary work in the students' own writing about the texts they are reading provides perhaps one of the richest possible contexts for word learning. Teaching strategies for identifying key vocabulary from a reading is another important use of context. Even in the less contextualized lexical journals, the emphasis on using example sentences from the learners' dictionary as patterns plus the requirement that students attempt to return to the context in which they first made the vocabulary error are two more ways in which practice is contextualized.

4. Does the approach teach students how to improve on their own?

Although the instructor initially plays a very important role in these vocabulary activities, the hoped-for outcome is that students will do the main work of studying the words that are identified for them and will learn to use the tools for independent word study as well as acquire the motivation and the habit. Instruction in how to make use of a learners' dictionary and knowledge of the pitfalls inherent in even the best of dictionaries should be useful.

5. Does the approach emphasize strategies for learning vocabulary?

If adjunct classes or workshops are available to writing classes, it would be very helpful to use some part of Schmitt's (1998) list of 58 vocabulary learning strategies so that students can explore new personal strategies and identify the ones that are most useful to them. If no such adjunct work is

possible, the writing teacher might consider a reading/writing topic focused on strategies. Excerpts and examples from Rebecca Oxford's (1990) book can be used and discussed as background to a writing assignment about effective or ineffective learning strategies. Meanwhile, improved strategies for using a monolingual learners' dictionary should also be an outcome of the lexical focus, and students should come to learn when dictionary use is likely to be a good strategy rather than a waste of time.

Student reaction to a lexical focus in the writing class has been generally positive, as shown in written evaluations and surveys. For example, although some students, particularly those at the lower level, claimed to prefer the use of teacher-generated vocabulary lists (and a quiz every Friday!), most students could see that context and an individualized approach were extremely important. At the upper level, students clearly liked having a choice and felt the lexical journal assignments were connected to their writing. Several mentioned that the assignment motivated them to do something about learning vocabulary although they still were not doing enough. Many mentioned the comparison of "nearly identical" words as a feature they liked. Though some students admitted they still were not learning in depth, they said they were retaining more, checking their journals when writing, and learning by using words in sentences.

Finally, the important point is increasing students' understanding of the nature of vocabulary learning and awakening their interest in learning more about words. Without student effort, a lexical focus will not have any magical result. However, many language acquirers, including those who have spent many years in the United States, are very receptive to the idea of finally doing something to address their perceived (and real) vocabulary deficits in a way that can translate into better writing.

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Endnotes

- ¹ “Acoustic approximations” include, for example, writing *firstable* instead of *first of all*. Scarcella also mentions that L2 high school students preparing themselves for the SAT examination study vocabulary but often misuse or overuse “SAT vocabulary” in subsequent writing.
- ² Lane and Lange’s *Writing Clearly* (1999) is an example of one of the most widely used of such texts. These authors recognize that word choice can be a global or disruptive error in many cases, though generally it is treated as a local error in their book.
- ³ Personal experience suggests that, in an attempt not to be repetitious, many students now use a thesaurus available through popular word processing programs.
- ⁴ *Collins COBUILD English Learner’s Dictionary* (1989), *Longman Dictionary of American English* (1997), and *Oxford American Word Power Dictionary* (1998) are some of the most widely used “large” learners’ dictionaries, with *The American Heritage English as a Second Language Dictionary* (1998), *Longman’s Handy Learner’s Dictionary* (1993), and *The Basic Newbury House Dictionary* (1998) now offering “thinner” American English learners’ dictionaries. See Scholfield (1998) for a list of on-line resources as well as a discussion of the value for writing students of bilingual dictionaries and of thesaurus-like tools such as the *Longman Language Activator* (1993).
- ⁵ Students and instructors alike can be misled by vocabulary glossed or presented in the introduction to each passage. These words seldom represent the core vocabulary needed for writing; rather (and importantly), these words or references are deemed difficult for students yet important for their comprehension of the passage. Examples from one passage on the work ethic of immigrants included *pantheon* and *Taoist*. Important as such words may be for background and/or full reading comprehension, they are not the core words students will use or misuse in writing their essays.
- ⁶ Since wrong word choices can make a message unclear, vocabulary can be seen as an issue of content and not just a sentence level problem. Thus, in programs where response to content (e.g., in a first draft) is separated from response to language/grammar (in a later draft), vocabulary might potentially be addressed in both the first and the later draft.

⁷ The following approach was developed by former UC Davis ESL lecturer and colleague Emily Blair (Lowry & Blair, 1996).

⁸ The “V by _____ING” pattern includes verbs with the general meaning of starting or finishing, such as *begin by*, *start off by*, *close by*, *finish up by*. The “V at n” pattern includes over 200 verbs falling into ten meaning groups, e.g., making a noise to communicate (*growl at*, *laugh at*, *swear at*, *yell at*) and communicating by facial expression (*frown at*, *grimace at*, *leer at*, *scowl at*).

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Appendix 1

Lexical Journal Assignment

VOCABULARY JOURNALS: This assignment is an attempt to:

1. improve the scope and accuracy of word choice in your writing, and
2. encourage you to explore your (dictionary name) as a tool to use independently in the future.

Look though the *journals, essay drafts, and graded papers* that you have received back from me so far. There you will find specially marked items [*], which are words that I think you should study in order to learn more about them. Follow the steps below.

- Step 1 *Find the words marked with a star [*] and choose the ones you want to work on.* These are “your” words, taken from your writing; sometimes I will suggest one of “my” words, i.e., a better choice for academic writing or simply a more accurate choice for your sentence. In such cases, you will *compare* the pair of words in your journal.
- Step 2 Find your words in (dictionary name). Read the dictionary entry and be sure you understand it. If several meanings are listed, *choose the meaning of the word that corresponds to the meaning you intended when you were writing.*
- Step 3 In your bluebook, draw a vertical line on your page slightly to the right of middle. Write in your journal *on the left hand side of the line.* I will respond on the right. Include the following:
- a) a definition (optional). Writing the definition is particularly useful if you are comparing two words that you have confused or that are close in meaning. If your error was completely unrelated to the word’s meaning you may omit this step. DO make a note of register (e.g., informal). or special usage.
 - b) any grammatical information the dictionary gives you, e.g., Is a noun *countable* or *uncountable*? Is a verb *transitive* or *intransitive*? Is there a *preposition* commonly associated with the word, and if so, which one? Look up abbreviations you do not understand. Ask me if you have problems.

- c) one or more example sentence(s) from the dictionary. Choose the one that seems most useful, but be sure it matches the meaning you wanted in your original use of the word. *Label* the parts of the sentence as practiced in class.
- d) your own sentence. Follow patterns from the example sentences! Try to write a sentence similar in meaning to the one in which you first wrote the word, i.e., in your journal or essay.
- e) any questions you may have about the definition or the use of this word.

Step 4 Look at previous journals to see if I have marked any sentences “*Try again: _____.*” This means you made an error that you need to address. Rewrite and correct the error to receive full points.

Step 5 Write the date at the top of your journal page *and* list in alphabetical order all the words you have included in this particular assignment.

Appendix 2

Active and Passive Voice: A Vocabulary Emphasis

Note: This exercise assumes that forms of the passive have been learned and examples practiced.

WARM-UP

Rewrite the sentence using the passive voice. Think about whether passive voice might be preferable to the active for any reason.

Active: *Tony caught the ball.* → Passive:

Active: *Someone has fired me!* → Passive:

Active: *You must do it by tomorrow.* → Passive:

Why can't this sentence be put into the passive?

It rained a little yesterday.

WRITING

How should I choose whether to use active or passive voice in my sentence?

Grammar

Make sure that the verb can be used in the passive (i.e., is it transitive, can it have a direct object?). Look in your dictionary if you are not sure. Some transitive verbs are marked "no passive."

Examples: *raise* *resemble* *reflect (meaning 2)*
 rise *result*

Meaning:

In your dictionary, if you are in any doubt, you should:

- a. Check the definition of the verb *and* the example sentences in the active voice.
- b. Notice what kinds of words are the subject and object of the verb.
- c. Check whether any of the example sentences illustrate passive voice. This might be an indication that this particular verb occurs commonly in the passive. Compare meanings to the idea you are trying to express.

Example #1:

approve (of) - to have a favorable opinion *or* to agree to officially

She doesn't approve of her daughter's boyfriend.

Do you think the President will ever approve our plan?

My plan for a summer internship hasn't been approved yet.

Active or passive?

In the last election the voters _____ a new plan for raising money for medical research.

Example #2

produce - (look at example sentences in your dictionary)

Active or passive?

*In good working conditions, new and creative ideas
_____ and that will benefit the company in the long run.*

Example #3

locate - (look at example sentences in your dictionary)

Active or passive?

Do you know where the copy shop _____?

Abstract vocabulary

Abstract vocabulary is more difficult; look up some of the following verbs, and write sentences in the active voice and the passive voice based on example sentences in the dictionary:

base (on/upon) consider establish include influence involve

