

# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

## STUDENT TO THE RESCUE: TEACHING VOCABULARY WITH CARE

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This is a story about an Australian English language teacher teaching English in a language school in Bangkok, Thailand. That person is me. The story is set in my first year of being a teacher. I was working six days a week at the school, thoroughly enjoying myself, meeting so many wonderful students, developing my skills and knowledge alongside many great teachers. I was finally at that stage of a new teacher's career where I was writing brief lesson plans in list form, rather than the comprehensive ones that I had learned to use on my initial training course. I was learning to be more spontaneous, to respond to the students, rather than focusing on what I was doing up there in front of class.

One morning in a two-hour class of university students taking summer holiday English lessons, I had assigned a reading task about home remedies for common ailments.

Garlic and honey for a sore throat.

Cucumbers for tired eyes.

Vinegar for bee stings.

*Vinegar.* That word to this day takes me back to that lesson.

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A hand goes up: "Teacher, what's vinegar?"

Not having been asked this before, my mind starts racing.

*What's the best way to teach this word? Should I mime it? Draw it? Explain it? It's kind of like wine, so I'll start there.*

I then proceed to explain that vinegar is like wine. I draw casks and pipes on the board. I am getting into fermentation and all kinds of concepts. The students (they are all listening and watching by now) just look blank. Nothing I say makes any sense.

Then a voice to my right.

"Nam som sai choo."

Everyone smiles, laughs, nods in understanding. I smile at the student.

"What did you say?", I asked with sweat on my brow.

"I said the Thai word for vinegar."

"Oh, thanks. So now we all know what vinegar is?"

"Yes teacher."

## Objectives:

1. To raise the awareness of the role of the students' first language in the English language classroom.
2. To introduce vocabulary teaching strategies for different kinds of vocabulary.

## Procedure:

1. Assign the students (teacher trainees) to small groups.
2. Ask the groups to consider what went wrong with the teacher's explanation of vinegar. What would they do differently?
3. After eliciting feedback from the groups, ask them to discuss the following two questions for a few minutes.
  - a. Is it appropriate for the students to use their first language (mother tongue) in the English language classroom? If so, for what purposes? If not, why?
  - b. Is it appropriate for the teacher to use the students' first language in the English language classroom? If so, for what purposes? If not, why?
4. After eliciting feedback from the groups, write the following words on the board, or include them in a handout. Ask the groups to come up with an effective strategy for conveying the meaning of each word.
  - a. Run
  - b. Blue
  - c. Anxious
  - d. Generalisation
  - e. Chocolate
5. If the group is of appropriate size (20-25), call the group together and ask each small group to peer-teach their vocabulary to the class. Or, if the group

is larger, re-mix small groups and ask each individual in the group to peer-teach their vocabulary to their small group.

6. Lead a discussion of different types of words and different ways to convey meaning. For example, if it is an action verb, you can often mime the action; if it is an adjective for a concrete object, you can use realia, or you could simply use the L1 form and function of the word; if it is an abstract adjective describing someone's state of mind, you can tell a story, or you can use an L1 equivalent if one exists.
7. If appropriate, assign a follow up activity for teachers to keep a reflective journal of the strategies they use to teach vocabulary in their lessons. This could be used later on for a follow up meeting, or for participants to share with their colleagues on a blog, in a newsletter, at a meeting, or in the staff room.

## Reflection:

Early career teachers often find themselves in hot water over unanticipated problems that arise during lessons. These can be powerful learning opportunities and should be viewed as such, rather than as a point of failure. In this case, as the teacher, I began a journey of learning about the uses of the L1 (and the debates surrounding this), and I also learned that not all words can be treated equally.

The students' first language is an abundant source of knowledge about language that can be used strategically in the classroom. Teachers need to think critically about how the L1 can support the language learning process in the classroom, and also identify the times that it constrains language learning. One important area where L1 can be used efficiently and effectively is teaching vocabulary. Teaching the word *vinegar* by explaining how it is made is neither efficient nor effective. It took up too much time in the reading lesson, and it didn't achieve the desired learning result. A simple use of the L1 equivalent in this case would have been both efficient and effective. Different kinds of words require different teaching strategies, and there are many excellent resources to follow this up, e.g. Nation (2008).

On the other hand, if the learning aim is to develop fluency in spoken English, then the use of L1 should be discouraged in many instances. Fluency development involves speaking without too many hesitations, using comprehensible rhythm and intonation patterns, while at the same time expressing one's thoughts. This is best done in the classroom using the target language as much as possible in a task or activity.

