

Unit 3 Vocabulary and vocabulary teaching

1 Common myths and misconceptions about words

- 1 You cannot stop words from developing new meanings. It is part of the dynamic process of the development of languages. Many words are now used with meanings which are very different from their original meanings. For example, *buxom* used to mean obedient but now it refers to the healthy, attractive appearance of large-breasted women like those in Rubens' paintings.
In many dictionaries now the primary meaning of *gay* is given as homosexual – for example, in the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* where the meaning of 'lively and enjoyable to be with' is described as 'slightly more old-fashioned'.
- 2 This ideal is unattainable as different cultures have different ways of representing the world around them and even have different worlds around them. For example, the Russian word *noga* is usually translated as *leg* even though its referent includes the leg and the foot; a green traffic light is referred to in Japanese as *ao* (literally *blue*); the Lozi word *munyanaka* is translated as *brother* even though it can refer to any related male who is not your father or uncle; and the French word *le pain* refers to something which looks and tastes very different from the referent of its translation *bread*. Also words are often borrowed from a language but are then used with a broader reference than in the original language. Thus *sukejuuru* in Japanese refers to both a formal schedule and an informal intention and *koosu* in Japanese refers to both a course for a race and a path or route for walking.
- 3 This is also unattainable for the same reasons given in 2 above. Thus the translation of *He's bought a dog* in Chinese or Arabic would be interpreted in different ways from in the original because of the different attitudes towards the function of dogs in the cultures represented by these languages. This would probably be true also of *They've killed a whale* translated into Japanese or Norwegian.
- 4 Using borrowed words can cause confusion if they are not in common use (eg *simpático*) and annoyance if a perfectly adequate word already exists (eg *le weekend*). But all languages borrow words to cover meanings they do not have a native word for. *Yacht*, *amok* and *bureau* are examples of English words borrowed from other languages.
- 5 It is not possible to say that one word is the correct one to use to refer to a particular referent. The best word to use is the one most efficient in the circumstances. Thus if there is only one thing on the table it would be much more sensible to ask someone helping you to pass the *thing on the table* or the *piece of wood* than the *joist*. However if you are ordering things from a specialist carpenter suppliers you are more likely to use the term *joist*. In the same way when watching a game of bowls in the park you would say to someone who has never seen a game before, *She bowled that one well* but would say, *Great wood!* to a bowls enthusiast.
- 6 Slang is normally most appropriate when talking to someone you know who

shares group membership with you (eg a fellow teenage rap or indie enthusiast) but it would also be completely acceptable in a letter to a friend, in a newsletter of a particular association or group, (eg a school rugby club) or in an advertisement aimed at a particular group of enthusiasts (eg for a pop concert).

- 7 What are considered to be taboo topics and words varies from culture to culture. Thus in England we often find euphemisms when referring to the toilet, to sex and to death (eg *the little boys' room*, *lovmaking* and *passed away*) but in other cultures much more explicit words are used without embarrassment in public. Thus it is quite possible that you might be asked at a dinner party in Indonesia, *Which condoms do you use?* but you would never be asked, *What do you think of communism?*
- 8 Some people seem to be able to build up their active and passive vocabularies through conscious learning of definitions and translations but most people seem to benefit more from experiencing lexical items being used for real communication in the language being learned. Although learning definitions and translations can help you when you have time to think (eg when reading or writing) it cannot really help very much when you need to understand or produce words in spontaneous conversation. And even if it did it could cause you to make errors because of differences of reference and implication between translation equivalents.

2 Word fields and lexical relationships

- A**
- (a) This is one possible answer: 1; 2; 3, 5; 4; 6, 7; 8, 10, 11, 12; 9.
 - (b) There is no definite answer to this question – only opinions. It could be argued that the core meaning includes doing something in a small space or restricted area.
 - (c) The important conclusion is that *pick* has many meanings and that some of them would not be relevant to learners of an intermediate level (eg as in sentences 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11 and 12). In addition, teaching a learner all the different meanings of *pick* at the same time would inevitably lead to confusion and to ineffective learning.
If it is useful to decide that there are many different words which are spelled and pronounced *pick* and to teach only those which are likely to be useful to the learner. *Pick up*, as in sentence 1, is common and useful, as is *pick* in sentence 3 and *pick up* in sentence 7.
There is no one correct answer to the question of which *picks* to teach to an intermediate group; the important thing is that the teacher is selective and teaches only those *picks* which the learners should know.
In order to avoid the possibility of confusion it is better to teach the different selected *picks* at different times.
Most of the *pick* sentences in **A** would not be good teaching examples as in most cases the sentences do not provide very much information about the meanings of *pick* (eg sentences 2 and 11). It is useful to exemplify new vocabulary items in contexts which help the learner to appreciate the meaning of the new item.
eg *Pick that glass up off the floor and put it on the table before somebody stands on it.*
 - (d) Instead of referring the student to a dictionary the teacher could have referred

him/her to the passage. The student's question makes it obvious that he/she does not realize that the item he/she does not know the meaning of is *pick up* and not *pick*. The dictionary will give many meanings of *pick* and the student will have great difficulty in finding the one relevant to the passage. In addition it is quite likely that he/she will not understand the definition even if a relevant one is found.

Dictionaries can be an aid to vocabulary acquisition but only when the students have been taught how to use them and only if the students use them to check deductions they have made after analysing the form of the words and the contexts in which they have met them.

The teacher who persistently tells students to look words up in their dictionaries is encouraging the sort of painful intensive reading which consists of looking up every unfamiliar word regardless of its usefulness to the learner or its significance in the text.

- (e) Students should be discouraged from asking such questions and encouraged instead to pay more attention to the overall meaning of the text than to the exact meaning of every vocabulary item in it.
The question is best answered by saying that *pick* has many meanings and that the student should examine the passage he/she is reading to try to discover clues to the particular meaning of *pick* in the passage. The teacher should lead the student to discover that he/she is looking for the meaning of *pick up* in the text and to examine the previous and subsequent sentences for clues (such as the fact that the speaker has a car and that the two are going to travel in it together).
- (f) Only one of the definitions is relevant to the student's problem. The others are not only irrelevant but are meanings which are unlikely to be useful to an intermediate student even if he manages to learn them all without confusion. Learning definitions does not magically bestow on the learner the ability to understand the word in context and does nothing at all to help use it accurately and appropriately.
A learner could write five correct, *safe* sentences which tell the teacher nothing about the learner's ability to understand or use the item, eg
Have you ever been to a port? or *I can see a port.*

- B** 1 The words in italics in each pair have the same referent (ie they refer to the same thing). Thus *slim* and *skinny* refer to the same physical characteristic of the same girl. However in each pair the words might have the same referent but they do not have exactly the same meaning. In each pair the two speakers have different attitudes to the same thing. Thus in (a) the first speaker does not like what William has become whereas the second speaker does; in (b) the first speaker finds Alice attractive whereas the second does not.
We can say that in each pair the words have the same referent but that they have different implied meanings.
- 2 (a) The implied meanings of the words should be taught as well as their referents.
(b) We should be very careful to distinguish between two items which are similar (but different) in meaning.
(c) It can be useful to introduce a new item by relating it to a similar item which is familiar to the learners providing that attention is focused on both the similarities and the differences.

- C** 1 (a) *picture* (b) *shoes* (c) *pen* (d) *meat* (e) *seat* . . . etc.
2 The replacements are all more general than the words in italics. They could refer to many different types (eg *picture* – photo, drawing, painting, portrait, sketch, etc).
3 (a) When teaching beginners it is important to select items which have a high coverage; that is, words which can be used by the beginner instead of other words. Thus *seat* can be used instead of *chair*, *sofa*, *bench*, etc and should thus be taught before them.
(b) A word with high coverage is usually the most general item in a 'family'. Thus *picture* is the most general item in the family which contains *photo*, *painting*, *drawing*, etc. Advanced learners should be able to understand and use many of the particular items as well as the general item in each of the common word families in English.
When teaching a particular item from a family it is important to focus attention not only on its membership of the family but also on how it is different from the general item and from the other particular items in the family which have already been taught. Thus when teaching *bench* it is important to show that it is a particular type of *seat* and that the words cannot always be used interchangeably and to show how a *bench* is different from a *chair* and a *sofa*.
- D** 1 In all the sentences the speaker has used a word which has a meaning which is close to the one he wants to communicate but which for various reasons is not appropriate. Thus in (a) the writer has used *fracture* to mean *break* because he is unaware that *fracture* can only refer to the breaking of particular types of things (mainly bones). In (d) the writer has used *feeble* to mean *weak* because he is unaware that *feeble* is normally only used to refer to animate things (mainly people) which are weak.
Almost certainly the writer has made these errors because he has learned a new word as a synonym of one he already knows either as a result of consulting a dictionary, of incompletely deducing the meaning of a new word or of being taught that the new word = the known word. Thus the writer has learned that *manufacture* = *make* but has not learned that the two words are not always interchangeable because *manufacture* can normally only be used when things are made in bulk and made to be sold.
- 2 It is dangerous to teach or to imply that two words are synonyms (ie that their meanings are exactly the same).
It is important to teach when an item cannot be used as well as when it can be used. One way of achieving this is to teach the item together with known words which it is frequently used with (eg *eject from/meeting*) and then to give examples of the types of words it cannot be used with (eg ~~X~~ *pierce/window*).
Another way is to demonstrate the difference between the two related words (eg by contrasting pictures of people walking and people marching, and by asking questions about their purposes).
- E** 1 The definitions consist only of equivalent words; they include no information about when it is appropriate to use the word being defined instead of its equivalent. For example, there is no information about when it would be appropriate to use *mate* (eg in informal conversation) and when it would not (eg in a formal interview).

- 2 The learner would probably think that the words were interchangeable and use those with restricted appropriacy (ie those being defined) in situations in which their use would be inappropriate (eg a worker addressing a letter requesting a rise to *The Boss*; someone starting a report, *Ten guys were selected for training*).
- 3 One-word definitions are often dangerous because they give the impression that the two words are interchangeable (ie that one can always be used instead of the other).
It is important to teach when it is appropriate to use an item and also to teach when it is not appropriate to use an item.

- F** 1 (a) Once two opposites have been taught it is often useful to indicate on a sloping line the relative positions of the items used to refer to degrees in between the opposites. This is particularly useful for example for showing that *quite good* is less than *good*.
(b) Degrees in between opposites can be referred to by *either* (i) adding another word to one of the opposites (eg *quite hot*) or (ii) using a different item (eg *warm*). It is usually easier to teach (i) first and then later to teach (ii).
- 2 The same items can appear on two different lines of opposition. Thus *good* can appear on a line of ability as well as on a line of virtue. It is important that the learner does not assume that the other items can appear on both lines, or he might, for example, use *poor* as an equivalent to *bad* on the line of virtue.
- G** 1 In most contexts *reach* and *arrive* can have the same meaning and are equally acceptable. However, *reach = get in touch with* cannot be replaced by *arrive* and *reach out = stretch out* cannot be replaced by *arrive out*. *Reach* must always be followed by an object whereas *arrive* need not be. *Reach* cannot be used with *back* whereas *arrive* can. *Arrive* must be followed by *at* when its object noun is preceded by an article whereas *reach* is never followed by *at*.
Brave and *courageous* appear to be interchangeable. However, whereas in many contexts *courage* seems to be able to replace *bravery*, *bravery* only seems to be able to replace *courage* when physical actions rather than mental actions are being referred to. In certain fixed phrases *bravery* can never be used instead of *courage*. There is no verb *to courage* corresponding to the verb *to brave*.
Put up and *accommodate* seem to communicate the same meaning but *accommodate* is not normally used in informal conversation.
- 2 To be totally interchangeable two words must be capable of always substituting for each other without changing the grammar, the meaning or the acceptability of the utterance.
- 3 It is sometimes useful to introduce a new item by relating it to a similar item which is already known. However, it is very important to point out any potential differences in meaning, grammar or acceptability and learners should never be left with the impression that word A = word B (except for the few pairs which are totally interchangeable). It is also important to show that even if two words are apparently interchangeable their related forms might not be (eg *brave* v *courageous*; *bravery* v *courage*).

3 Factors in the teaching of vocabulary

- A** 1 It is important to realize that two words which are considered to be opposites will rarely be capable of a relationship of opposition in all conceivable contexts. If two words are introduced as opposites or if a new word is introduced as the opposite of a known word it is important to show when the two words are not opposites as well as when they are.
- 2 There is some point in teaching all these pairs together providing that initially the relationship of opposition is demonstrated in appropriate contexts, that the students never learn that word A = the opposite of word B and that eventually contexts are used to show when the two words are not opposites.
- B** 1 (a) and (b) are useless teaching examples as in both cases the context gives no clue to the meaning of *amazed*. In (c) *found out* gives some sort of clue to the meaning of *amazed* but it is not a very informative teaching example. (d) is a good teaching example as it contains a lot of information to help the learner work out the meaning of *amazed*. (e) gives clues to the unexpected aspect of *amazed* but is not a very good teaching example as it could give the misleading impression that *amazed* is always used to refer to unpleasant surprises (cf (d)).
- 2 Such examples should be as informative as possible and ideally should enable the learner to accurately deduce the meaning of a word which is totally new to him.
- C** 1 The sentences say very little about the ability of the students to use *swept* as all the sentences are *safe* sentences which accurately imitate a model but do not contain any information which enables you to decide whether the students know why or how you sweep a carpet.
- 2 Asking students to write sentences using a particular word is basically a waste of time as very often correct sentences are produced which reveal nothing about the students' ability to understand and use the word. However, if such an exercise is set and safe answers are produced the teacher can probe by asking such questions as *Why did she sweep it?* and *What did she sweep it with?*
- D** 1 (a) *nibbit* = biscuit (or possibly cake)
Clues:
in your pocket – therefore small and probably wrapped.
in case I was hungry – therefore edible and probably more substantial than a sweet.
prefer the ones with chocolate on.
That's probably why I didn't eat it.
- (b) *slinned* = cleaned
Clues:
took your coat to be – not done at home therefore probably done in a shop.
I hope they get all the stains out this time – therefore definitely not *mended* or *altered* and almost certainly *cleaned* rather than *washed* (not normally done in shops or to coats anyway).
- 2 *ding* = slap
Clues:
ding him – therefore done to someone.

hard – therefore physical.
He ... naughty – therefore a boy.
hurt – confirms physical.
hand – therefore not cane, ruler or fist.
on his leg – therefore not *punch*.
soon get over it – therefore not serious.

- 3 (a) *glogget* = deckchair or folding chair

Clues:

sitting in the garden.
didn't want it to get wet.
folded it up.

put it in the garage.
with the other garden seats.

- (b) *unseddy* = untidy

Clues:

I was furious
I'd told the kids to put all their toys in the trunk to keep the garage seddy.
there were toys all over the garage floor.

Learners can be taught to try to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar items from an analysis of the context.

- E** 1 and 2 Various answers are possible. Our answers were:

- (a) get something back (verb)
- (b) a book with a card cover (adjective or noun)
- (c) having too much of something (noun)
- (d) below the moon (adjective)
- (e) twice a day (adjective or adverb)
- (f) like a punk (adverb)
- (g) think afterwards (verb) *or* the period after thinking (noun)
- (h) make impossible (verb)
- (i) recommend that something does not happen *or* withdraw a recommendation (both verb)
- (j) good at attending (adjective)

- 3 It is useful to teach students the meanings of common roots (eg *possib*) and prefixes (eg *post-*) and about how prefixes modify the meaning of roots. It is also useful to teach the grammatical and semantic functions of common suffixes (eg *-ate*).

Often a learner can work out the meaning of an unfamiliar word by examining the form and the context of the word.

- 4 It is a good idea to warn students that there are exceptions and that they should always check their guesses against information in the context.

- F** 1 ? It was sensational to hear.

? It was amazing to eat.

✗ It was superlative to eat/watch/hear/drive.

✗ It was brilliant to eat/hear/drive.

- 2 All the words in column 2 could be used interchangeably in such sentences as *It was a(n) — film*. However they are not always interchangeable. For instance

it seems that *brilliant* when used in the pattern *It was + adjective + infinitive* is restricted to reference to *performances* and that *superlative* cannot be used in this pattern at all. It also seems that some of the adjectives in column 2 simply mean *very good* (ie *marvellous*, *superb* and *wonderful*) while others can sometimes mean *very good* but can also have other meanings (eg *amazing* can mean *very good* or *very surprising*).

- 3 It is dangerous to assume that certain words are always interchangeable because they are interchangeable in a particular type of context. It can be useful to teach words in families providing that the grammatical and semantic sub-groupings are made evident.

- G** 2 The words belong to the same family but are by no means interchangeable. Sub-groups can be formed on the basis of features of meaning. Thus sub-group A1 might consist of *bought*, *purchased*, *hired*, *rented*, *borrowed*, *leased* and *acquired* while sub-group A2 consisted of *loaned*, *let*, *rented out*, *sold*, *leased* and *lent*. A1 involves *movement towards* the subject. A2 involves *movement away* from the subject. Another sub-grouping could be B1 (*bought*, *purchased*, *hired*, *rented*, *rented out*, *sold*, *leased*, *let*), B2 (*borrowed*, *lent*) and B3 (*acquired*, *loaned*). B1 includes the payment of money, B2 excludes the payment of money, and B3 could either include or exclude the payment of money.

Yet another sub-grouping could be C1 (*purchased*, *leased*; *acquired*, *loaned*) and C2 (all other items). The items in C1 are restricted in use in that they are normally only used in formal (and usually business) situations whereas the items in C2 are not restricted in this way.

The words also differ in collocation (ie the words they can acceptably be used with). Thus *leased* is restricted in collocation to *house* and *business* and words like them. *Rented* can collocate with *house*, *car*, *business*, *tent*, *television* and words like them (ie words which refer to things you pay money for the continuous use of) and *hired* can collocate with such words as *house*, *car*, *business*, *tent*, *maid*, *television* and *picture* (ie words referring to things or people you can pay to use for a short time). Another example of restricted collocation is the fact that *lent* cannot normally be followed immediately by *a* (eg ✗ *I've lent a car*) while *acquired* cannot normally be followed immediately by *my* when it is preceded by the present perfect (eg ✗ *I've acquired my business*). *Lent* could be said to belong to sub-group D1 and *acquired* to D2.

- H** This is a useful exercise for teaching the collocations of items in a *family* and thus for helping to teach the differences in meaning and use between the items.

It is important to realize that this exercise is only one stage in teaching learners to use the items accurately and appropriately as knowledge does not automatically lead to ability to use.

4 Phrasal and prepositional verbs

- A** Category one (verb + preposition): 4, 5, 7, 8 (prepositional verbs)
 Category two (verb + adverb): 1, 2, 3, 6 (phrasal verbs)

- B** Each verb is followed by an adverbial particle and then a preposition.

- C**
- 1 He'll have to be spoken *to* firmly (*to* is unstressed).
 - 2 This work will have to be put *aside* (*aside* is stressed).
 - 3 Three of the crew cannot be accounted *for* (*for* is unstressed).
 - 4 The house was cleaned *up* after the party (*up* is stressed).
 - 5 This form has been filled *in* (*in* is stressed).
 - 6 A lot of ships have been laid *up* in the south-west of England (*up* is stressed).
 - 7 The steelworks have been shut *down* (*down* is stressed).
 - 8 This record has been worn *out* (*out* is stressed).

Foreign learners often find it difficult to distinguish between phrasal and prepositional verbs. This provides a useful test. Phrasal verbs (with adverb particles) carry stress on the adverb in the passive, and the adverb can be separated from the verb by its object – this applies to 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 above. Prepositional verbs cannot be *split* and the preposition is unstressed in passive sentences. This applies to 1 and 3.

- D**
- 1 *catch on* means understand; not deducible from its parts.
 - 2 *answer back* – the meaning can be deduced straightforwardly from the parts.
 - 3 *gone off* – idiomatic meaning; not directly deducible.
 - 4 *let down* – the meaning can be deduced from the parts.
 - 5 *let down* – idiomatic meaning; not directly deducible.
 - 6 *lay in* – idiomatic meaning; not directly deducible.
 - 7 *run down* – idiomatic meaning; not directly deducible.
 - 8 *put out* – idiomatic meaning; not directly deducible.
 - 9 *stand up* – the meaning can be deduced from the parts.
 - 10 *ran away* – the meaning can be deduced from the parts.
 - 11 *knock off* – idiomatic meaning; not directly deducible.
 - 12 *brush up* – idiomatic meaning; not directly deducible.

- E** The exercise asks for phrasal verb synonyms for the Latin-based words in the exercise. It would be more useful if it gave some indication of when the Latinate equivalents are more appropriate (phrasal verbs tend to occur more in *informal* speech and writing). No reason is given for the substitution as an exercise. The verbs required are:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 taken out | 6 left out |
| 2 bought up | 7 gave (him) away |
| 3 looks like | 8 get away |
| 4 put off | 9 died out |
| 5 running (your brother) down | 10 cut down |

nb Phrasal and prepositional verbs cause foreign learners a lot of difficulty, for reasons demonstrated in these exercises. They are best dealt with as items of vocabulary each time they appear, and learners should be encouraged to note down examples each time they meet a new verb of this type. R. A. Close in *A Reference Grammar for Students of English* (Longman) offers a very full treatment of the subject, with useful categorization, and there is a more exhaustive treatment in A.P. Cowie and R. Mackin (1993) *The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* which is devoted to phrasal and prepositional verbs.

The main structural teaching point is to give learners criteria for distinguishing between the types (see **B** and **C** above) so that they can handle the syntax.