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## Second Language Vocabulary Learning and Teaching: Still a Hot Topic

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### Abstract

For many reasons second language vocabulary learning and teaching continues to be a topic of interest for learners, instructors, and researchers. This article describes the implementation of personal glossaries in a community program offering English as second language classes to Latina/o Spanish speaking adults. Field notes, interviews, and student work served as data sources to document the results. Suggested steps for the implementation of personal glossaries, pedagogical implications for the teaching of second language vocabulary, and suggestions for future research are provided.

### Introduction

For many reasons second language(L2)vocabulary learning and teaching continues to be a topic of interest for learners, instructors, and researchers (Bogaards & Laufer, 2004; Folse, 2004; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). Vocabulary acquisition is just as important as the acquisition of grammar; it is the heart of communication (Amiryousefi & Vahid, 2010; LU Mei-fang, 2008). As McVey (2007) explains, “Along with correct grammar, an extensive vocabulary will help ESL students communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing” (p. 20). Some researchers believe that vocabulary knowledge may determine the quality of listening, speaking, reading and writing of an L2 learner (Mokhtar, Rawian, Yahaya, et al., 2010).

Research has demonstrated the usefulness and relevance of L2 vocabulary strategies (Baicheng, 2009; Fan, 2003; Hernández, Herter, & Hernández, 2010;

Larrotta, 1999; Lu Mei-fang, 2008; Montelongo, Hernández, Herter, & Hernández, 2010). However, there is a gap between the L2 vocabulary learning strategies that students use and the vocabulary strategies employed or recommended by instructors (Larrotta, 1999). At times, instructors overestimate how much vocabulary students really understand which can result in a communication breakdown between instructor and student (Folse, 2004). There is also a new trend of teaching students to be independent and responsible for their learning. Research on which methods of instruction increase independent learning of vocabulary words continues to be a necessity (Gu, 2003; Lu Mei-Fang, 2008). This article describes the implementation of personal glossaries in a community program offering English as second language (ESL) classes to Spanish speaking adults.

## Relevant Literature

Research on vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies is vast. This section will highlight some relevant publications within the past decade, followed by a synthesis of their conclusions and recommendations.

Nisbet (2010) offers practical guidance for designing and implementing vocabulary instruction using a three-tiered vocabulary framework: most basic words, high-frequency words, and low-frequency words. Her article provides specific recommendations for selecting and teaching vocabulary in the adult ESL classroom as well as strategies for instruction.

Montelongo and colleagues (2010) present cognates as a tool to scaffold English language learning. They recommend the teaching of morphological generalizations and strategies to recognize cognates in order to accelerate language learning.

Baicheng (2009) discusses the use of example sentences as a means of direct (intentional) vocabulary learning in ESL and EFL (English as foreign language) contexts, proposing that this strategy promotes learners' vocabulary learning and retention. Baicheng states that "the effect is probably better when students write their own authentic example sentences than when the example sentences are randomly provided by their instructor" (p. 183).

Walters and Bozkurt (2009) investigate the effect of vocabulary notebooks on EFL students' vocabulary acquisition. They study students' and teachers' attitudes toward the use of vocabulary notebooks and conclude that vocabulary notebooks are an effective learning tool when students have self-motivation for language learning. They provide a detailed explanation on the implementation of vocabulary notebooks within a formal EFL program.

Lu Mei-Fang (2008) recommends that instructors (a) help students with word knowledge (e.g., word meaning, word use, word formation, word grammar); (b)select vocabulary to be learned; (c) facilitate students' incorporation of new words into language that is already known; (d)provide opportunities for student

interaction with words; (e) incorporate tasks which require mental processing; (f)avoid teaching similar words at the same time; and (g)teach strategies for self-learning (e.g., guess in context, use glossaries for specific jargon, use bilingual and monolingual dictionaries).

McVey (2007) suggests instructors to: teach vocabulary in context; require the use monolingual English dictionaries; teach prefixes, suffixes, and roots; teach various forms of a new word; encourage students to read; teach reading skills; encourage students to review new vocabulary; and give students opportunities to use new vocabulary.

Folse (2004) discusses eight myths: (a) vocabulary is not as important as grammar or other areas; (b) using word lists to learn L2 vocabulary is unproductive; (c) presenting new vocabulary in semantic sets facilitates learning; (d) use of translations should be discouraged; (e) guessing words from context is an excellent strategy; (f) the best vocabulary learners make use of one or two really good specific vocabulary learning strategies; (g) the best dictionary for L2 learners is a monolingual dictionary; and(h) teachers, textbooks, and curricula cover L2 vocabulary adequately. Through discussing and dispelling these myths, Folse (2004) asserts that vocabulary is fundamental in the process of learning L2. He states that vocabulary instruction should have a more central role in L2 curriculum.

Gu (2003) reviews empirical research on vocabulary learning strategies in second/foreign language. This review focuses on strategies such as guessing meaning, use of dictionaries, note-taking, memorization and repetition, encoding and mnemonics. Gu claims that choice, use, and effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies depend on the task, learner, and learning context. He also argues that strategies that focus on the use of words, rather than their retention, are more effective.

Laufer and Hill (2000) look at how EFL university learners use electronic dictionaries during a reading task. They investigate a possible relationship between lookup patterns and retention of looked up words. Results suggest that different people have different

lookup preferences and that the use of multiple dictionary information reinforces retention. Also, using electronic dictionaries during a reading task has a positive effect on incidental vocabulary learning.

During the past ten years, the literature has focused on the effectiveness of specific vocabulary learning strategies and the ideology behind vocabulary instruction. There has been a genuine preoccupation about how to more efficiently guide ESL/EFL students into learning/acquiring vocabulary. Debates on topics such as using monolingual dictionaries, utility of guessing meaning from context, use of translation, and teaching for incidental/direct vocabulary learning still remain. However, researchers seem to agree that (a) it is important to provide students with opportunities to interact with new vocabulary words and have them write their own examples; (b) vocabulary learning strategies need to focus on the use rather than the retention of words; (c) the task, the learner, and the learning context determine the choice, use, and effectiveness of vocabulary learning; and (d) vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of communication and it should be an important portion of L2 curriculum.

### **Background as ESL Learner and Instructor**

Even after spending half of my life time teaching, interacting, and publishing in English I still continue learning new vocabulary every day. I still consult the computer thesaurus to clarify the use of words such as “advice and advise”. I ask my colleagues to clarify colloquial language for me during our conversations. I write down idioms when I hear them at faculty meetings and try to incorporate them to my repertoire. I know that “vocabulary knowledge is not something that can be fully mastered; it is something that expands and deepens over the course of a lifetime” (Mokhtar, Rawian, Yahaya, et al., 2010, p. 72).

As an instructor I approach vocabulary learning and teaching following the principles of communicative language teaching (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 1991). I believe that “classroom activities should be meaningful and involve

real communication” (Richards, 2006, p. 2). I am fully aware that learning strategies that work for some learners may not work for others. No vocabulary strategy by itself is totally effective; many factors influence the effectiveness and helpfulness of strategies (Larrotta, 1999). For example, knowing the definition of a word may be useful at a certain point but it might not serve to improve reading comprehension. The reader also has to appreciate how the word fits into the context. For writing, definitions do not always contain enough information to allow a person to use a word correctly. There is a big difference between knowing what a word means and being able to use it. This can explain why our students have problems writing meaningful sentences by using new words and why they will encounter difficulties while trying to use context as a vocabulary learning strategy.

We should instruct our students in the use of a variety of strategies to help them in a more effective way. Later, they can choose which vocabulary strategies work best for them. It is important to remember that adults are self-directed and responsible for their own decisions; they are goal oriented and learn about what is relevant to them (Knowles, 1990). As instructors we think we know what our students need to learn, but we should also inquire about their real learning needs outside the classroom so that we can negotiate with our students and find a happy medium for both parties.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

During fall 2009, working with a group of seventeen Spanish speaking adults enrolled in a community ESL program, I implemented personal glossaries as a core class activity. This ESL class lasted ten weeks and was offered once a week for two hours. The goal implementing personal glossaries was to provide the students with a set of strategies that they could use in order to learn L2 vocabulary. I wanted to promote learning of L2 vocabulary that was important to the learners because they needed to use these words in order to communicate in real-world situations not because I had selected those vocabulary words for them to learn.

In order to document the results of implementing personal glossaries, I kept field notes, interviewed the students, and took pictures of students' work. Field notes were useful in documenting observations about students' work and their attitudes toward implementing personal glossaries. Field notes include "...dates, and times, who was present and what the physical setting was like, what social interactions occurred, and what activities took place" (Patton, 2003, p. 303). Interviews inform "...people's interior experiences. We can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings" (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). Interviewing the students at the end of class helped to document their opinion about studying L2 vocabulary and implementing personal glossaries. Finally, taking pictures of student products gave me the opportunity to examine their work and later ask questions about what they were learning. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

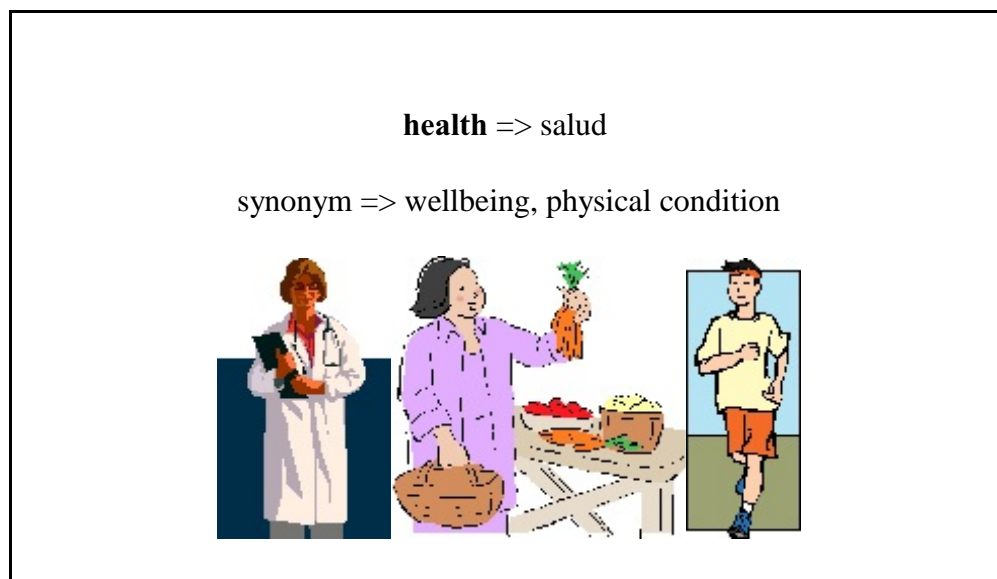
## Building Personal Glossaries

The students received a handout explaining suggested steps for building their personal glossary. They used index cards to build individualized banks of self-chosen vocabulary-words. We started by punching a hole in the upper left corner of five index cards. We used a metallic ring to keep the index cards together so that the students could add more cards and carry around their personal glossary to review it. For the front of the index card we followed five steps:

1. Write the new word on top of the card.
2. Consult a dictionary or a person.
3. Translate the word.
4. Look for at least one synonym or word(s) that could mean the same.
5. Associate the word to an image; draw or paste a picture.

Figure 1 shows the example that the students received for the front of the index card.

Figure 1: Front of the Index Card



For the back of the index card we followed other five steps:

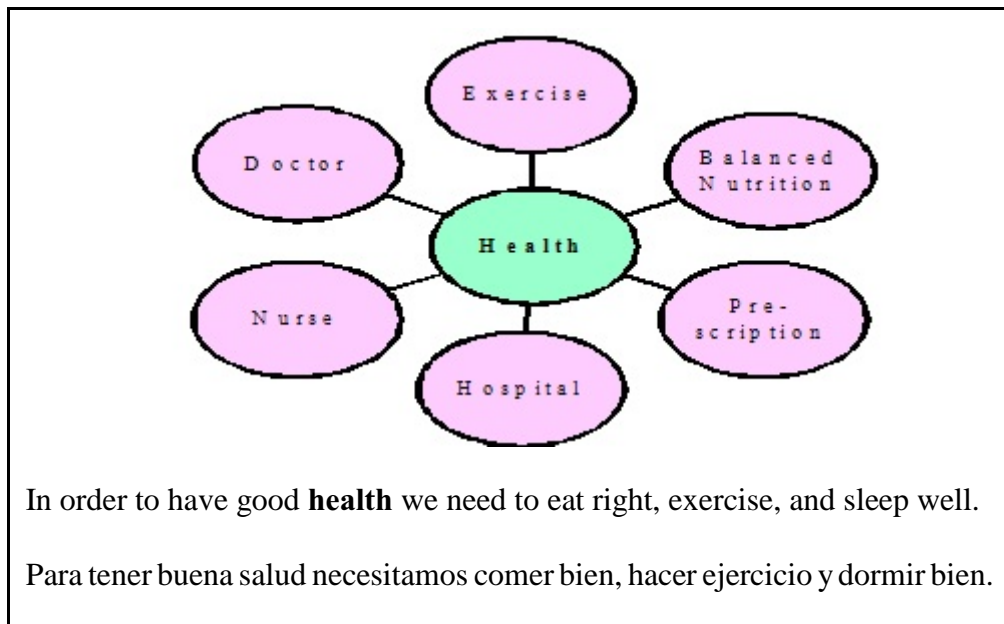
1. Write the word in the middle of the card and draw a bubble around the word.
2. Draw lines coming out of the bubble.
3. Connect the new word to other (related) words that you already know.

4. Use the new word to write a sentence in English.

5. Provide an appropriate translation for the sentence in your native language (Spanish).

Figure 2 shows the example that the students received for the back of the index card.

Figure 2: Back of the Index Card



### Results of Implementing a Personal Glossary

Studying vocabulary served different purposes in our ESL class. Some students were intermediate-beginners and for them studying vocabulary helped to improve other skills besides augmenting vocabulary knowledge. Adriana said: “I have improved my spelling... Studying vocabulary has served as a refresher of things that I knew and that I have forgotten. I have also learned new meanings of words...” Other students who were true-beginners focused on learning how to write sentences. In the interview Jorge shared: “I have learned how to put

words together into sentences... and write sentences that make sense! It is hard to use the language knowing so few words... Knowing vocabulary words from work has helped me a lot. I make the effort to use the words I already know in writing”. Most of the students agreed that they needed to learn more vocabulary words in order to feel more confident about communicating ideas in ESL. It was common to hear from the students that: “My goal for this class is to increase my English vocabulary” (Rosa).

In class students took turns to share and explain their work on the blackboard presenting one of the words they have chosen to learn that week. This



practice reinforced the new knowledge and rewarded the students' effort to continue learning. "I don't feel nervous when I recognize most of the words... I have learned that it is important to know how to use the word not just learn the meaning" (Maria). The blackboard presentations allowed students to explain what they were learning. They were proud to share their specialized knowledge with us in class and learned how to explain their language knowledge to others. Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 provide examples of students' personal glossaries.

Figure 3: Front of Index Card "Ceramics"

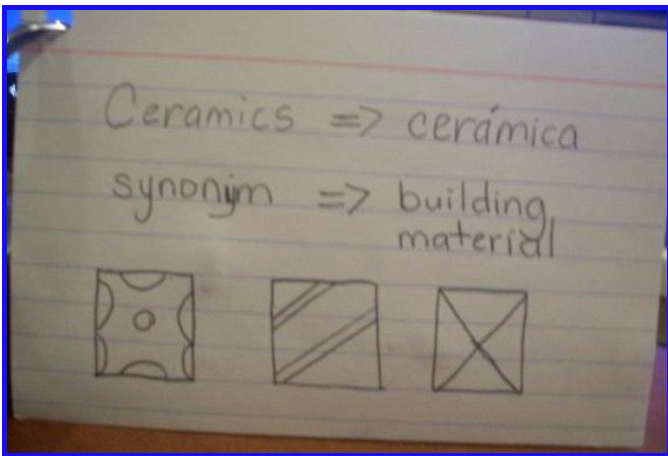


Figure 4: Back of Index Card "Ceramics"

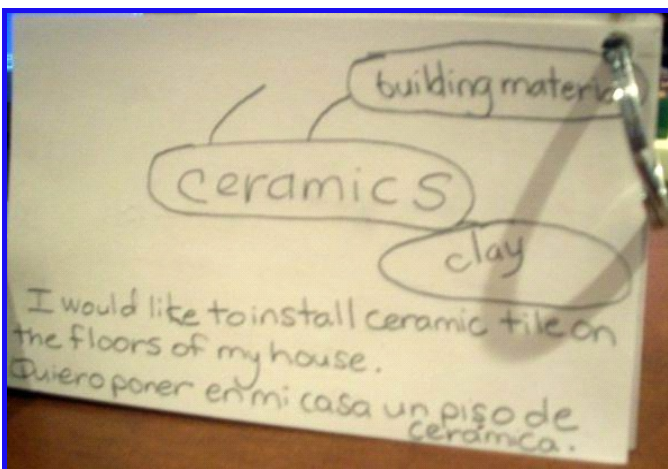
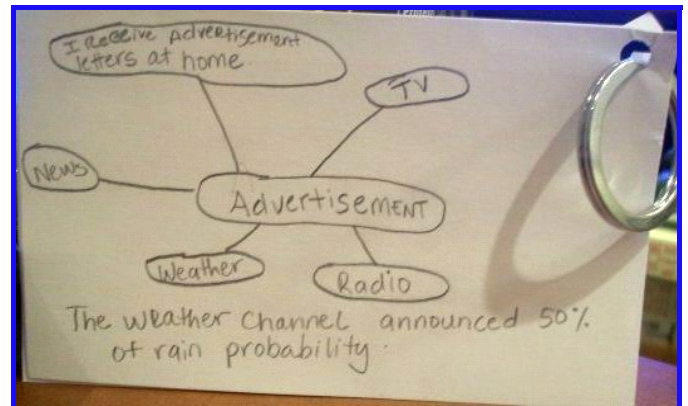


Figure 5: Front of Index Card "Advertisement"



Figure 5: Back of Index Card "Advertisement"



Figures 3 and 4 about "ceramics" are examples of Benito's work. When asked he explained: "For the personal glossary I used vocabulary words I needed to learn for my work in carpentry and construction". Figure 5 and 6 about "advertisement" come from Yesenia's personal glossary. She said: "It is hard to remember the spelling of some words because they are long... like "advertisement". I see this word all the time but I rarely remember it". Most of the students explained that adding an image/drawing was helpful to make associations and remember the new word more easily. Benito shared that "it gives me more ideas on what to write in the sentences using the new words". Benito and Yesenia's index cards illustrate

how the students built their glossaries.

Looking at students' work and their choice for L2 words to be learned, we can say that they used the personal glossary to study words that they needed to learn in the context of their real life activities such as work, home, their children's education, and daily interactions with people outside the classroom, or simply because they were curious about the word and wanted to learn it. Carmen said: "I like when I learn a new word in class and then I hear it in real life. Simple words such as "neighbor and garage sale"... I had to use them when my mom asked me to take her to a garage sale in her community. Now I recognize more words than when we started class".

The students viewed the steps provided to build the glossary as "guidelines". It is evident in the examples (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6) that students took a different approach to the activity and did not follow all suggested steps. For example, sometimes students did not translate into Spanish and they only used English because they were sure of the content and message of their vocabulary cards. Also, in the field notes, I wrote about how looking for synonyms helped the learners clarify for meaning, reach a better understanding of the many meanings of the word, and decide on the meaning they wanted to use later. This added an extra layer to understanding grammar and to understanding how English words work. Maria explained that "a synonym is more than just a translation; it is more words that mean the same... at times I can remember more easily than knowing only one word."

Step 3 for the front of the index card (Translate the word) and step 5 for the back of the card (Use the new word to write a sentence in English and provide the corresponding sentence in Spanish) were helpful in increasing students' confidence about the meaning of the words and the meaning of what they were really saying in English. Moni explained that "a word can have many meanings in English. When I translate the word I can use it in a sentence and be sure that I am using the correct meaning. I can say what I want to say and I can explain in class what I mean." In

addition, Silvia stated: "Writing sentences help me to learn the new words. I remember more when I write or do something else with the new vocabulary words." Writing a sentence using the new L2 word helped students to become aware of the different parts in the sentence. Providing the Spanish and English versions of the sentence helped the students to be aware of the idea and message they wanted to communicate in English. It also helped me to understand the meaning intended by the student. I was able to provide explanations about grammar structure or alternative ways to express an idea in English. Reviewing and analyzing the students' work helped me identify topics for mini-lessons on grammar and sentence structure.

For step 3 on the back of the index card (Connect the new word to other/related words that you already know); while brainstorming related words, the students made connections to previous knowledge. More than learning new words this was especially helpful in activating students' passive vocabulary. The students realized they know more vocabulary words than they imagine. Rosa said: "I am very familiar with the vocabulary words related to my job as a beautician, but I know I need to learn other vocabulary words to be able to communicate with people outside work". This reflection process helps students enhance their confidence about the language knowledge they already have and realize about what they need to keep learning.

During the individual interviews, students reported how much they appreciated the usefulness of learning L2 vocabulary in a more personalized manner. Jorge shared that: I am learning new words each Tuesday in class; it is fun! Maria said: "This strategy gave me the opportunity to think of words I needed to learn so that I could use them in real life". Moni also stated: "Building a personal glossary was good. I continued looking for more vocabulary words and could see relationships among words. I learned a new way of increasing my vocabulary." Other students were worried about learning pronunciation and being able to remember the meaning of the new

vocabulary words. Gabi explained: “Knowing the vocabulary is very important when one learns a new language. Even the most basic words such as the parts of the body become important and necessary to learn... It is good to learn new words. The problem is learning the pronunciation and remembering the meaning!”

### **Challenges Implementing Personal Glossaries**

Building a personal glossary was an engaging activity; however, some challenges emerged. For example, it took time for students to realize that I was not going to give them a list of words to learn and that they were responsible for deciding on the vocabulary words they wanted/needed to learn. These vocabulary words did not come from class readings; for the personal glossary students needed to use **their** own vocabulary words. Identifying the vocabulary words for building their personal glossaries required reflection and taking ownership of their learning. At first the students chose random words, even words they already knew; later, they realized this defeated the purpose of the activity. With time and practice they became more intentional about what words to include in their glossaries.

Another challenge was the lack of skills using the dictionary and this turned into a teachable moment. I encouraged students to use the dictionary in class and to be strategic about looking for meaning of vocabulary words that they considered were impeding their comprehension of text or when they needed to transmit a specific meaning. There was a mini-lesson into using the dictionary and becoming familiar with the type of information that it provides. We had thirty Webster’s dictionaries available in class but these dictionaries were usually piled up on my desk. I distributed them at the beginning of class, but if I forgot to distribute them or if I did not explicitly ask for it the students did not open the dictionaries at all in class. Later in the term, by the fourth week, the students themselves started to grab a dictionary from the pile on my desk and to use it as soon as we started

working on reading comprehension or composition activities in class. Students started asking questions and experimenting with the dictionary to understand what were the correct words to use for the intended meaning.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Vocabulary acquisition is a gradual, long process and some tasks and strategies are appropriate at different points along the way. For example, it is acceptable that students make long lists of words to be memorized when they are just beginning to learn a language and they do not have any vocabulary at all. However, this is not effective when students are in an advanced class and have acquired certain maturity in the target language. In contrast, looking for definitions in the text and guessing meaning from context are strategies that give some difficulty to beginners. Students need their instructor’s help and guidance to acquire the ability to use these strategies in an effective way. Building a personal glossary is a strategy that can be adopted by students at different English proficiency levels. Instructor and students can make some arrangements and combine this strategy with another or make some variations to the strategy to make it more interesting and more effective according to the class and learning context. Vocabulary learning is a step by step process requiring work and training and involves multiple exposures to the vocabulary words to be learned.

Students and instructors need training in using vocabulary strategies. Instructors need to attend workshops related to the topic; they can learn more through exploring new strategies and reading about available research. For example, we know that incidental vocabulary learning takes place while reading and that encountering a word in many contexts is a favorable factor. Thus instructors should assign more reading to their students on their reading level. Devoted L1 readers typically display larger than average vocabularies (Ellis, 1995). Also, proficient L2 learners appear to acquire much of their vocabulary



through reading (Krashen, 1989). As instructors, once we get to know our students and their skills we can recommend reading appropriate to their language level so that students find pleasure in reading and make it a habit. Instructors should find the optimal division between incidental learning (through reading, interacting with people outside class, TV, radio, newspaper) and explicit vocabulary instruction. Efficient use of vocabulary instruction also depends on distinguishing the types of difficulties that different words and different contexts pose for readers. Instructors should be able to identify which words will be picked up without difficulty.

Finally, instructors' attitudes play an important role. Depending on the commitment and enthusiasm of the instructor, students feel more or less motivated to use strategies. Instructors should train students to select when to use which strategy. Instructors should gradually introduce more strategies to meet the different learning styles. They should be more creative while implementing vocabulary strategies in order to help their students find the strategy that best fits their learning style and maintain students' interest.

### **Future Research**

More detailed work on students' opinions and attitudes toward the use and benefits of using personal glossaries is necessary. A more extensive qualitative study including a larger population sample informing the type of language learning that takes place when students build personal glossaries can be made.

The development of students' vocabulary is also necessary and possible in classes of literature and/or composition, not just in beginning English classes, and this would be a rich area of study. There are also several ways, aside from reading, to work with vocabulary strategies; learners can increase their vocabulary by working with strategies at the level of speaking and listening skills. Group work for learning vocabulary should be promoted by instructors as a new approach to L2 vocabulary development.

More detailed work on matching strategies to

students' general proficiency levels can be made. Instead of focusing on what students should be doing in order to learn vocabulary, we should focus on what they are really doing. It is important to continue doing research into which vocabulary learning strategies are being used by our students. Instructors should try to understand how students are going about mastering English vocabulary and help them to develop a better perspective on and control over their progress in learning.

Finally, instead of giving students the list of vocabulary words that they need to learn, the instructor should provide students with the opportunity to learn the words they need to learn for work, school, and their every day, real-world activities. This will require an exploration of adult learners' *funds of knowledge*, that is to say, the students' histories, identities, relationships with learning, attitudes, values, etc, (Baker, 2005) and linking this knowledge to L2 vocabulary learning strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Building personal glossaries promoted responsibility and awareness in the students toward learning new vocabulary words, *their* vocabulary words. The students learned about spelling, grammar and sentence structure, and the different functions and meanings of words. This activity also promoted reflection in the students. They made discoveries about the knowledge they possess and the learning needs they still have. Students realized about their capabilities as learners which in turn increased their confidence in learning the new language.

As the class instructor, I learned more about students' occupations, background knowledge, learning needs, and the times when they use English outside the classroom. Implementing personal glossaries gave me more opportunities to review/think about students' work, listen to their sentences, inquiries and questions. In addition, building a personal glossary is the type of activity that students

can continue doing after the course is finished. This is also the type of activity that instructors can modify to fit the purpose and goals of the classes they teach.

The implementation of personal glossaries was intended to draw on the adult learners' funds of knowledge in the hopes to build bridges between the classroom and the students' real life activities and vocabulary learning needs. The learners showed high levels of engagement with the activity that led to academic conversations and integration of language skills; students learned more than just a list of new vocabulary words. This article illustrates some of the benefits of explicit vocabulary instruction. Instructors can help students a great deal by guiding and instructing students on vocabulary learning strategies proved to be effective. Second language vocabulary learning and teaching is still a hot topic!

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