

Grammatically Speaking

by Michelle Jackson

How to Teach Students How to Use a Thesaurus

I had made it to the bottom of the pile: the last essay to grade before ushering in my Saturday afternoon. As these essays were all about food, I kept a running list of dishes my students had described that I wanted to research. Visions of savory biryani, sizzling lap chong, and spicy chilaquiles danced in my head as I wrote encouraging notes at the foot of every last page. In contrasting his diet to that of his friend, one student wrote, “Humberto will drink anything sweet. He even prefers flavored water. However, I only drink holy water.” Thesaurus-itis had struck again.

Oddly enough, the occurrence of Thesaurus-itis is one of those unique language-teacher experiences that excites me. For one, the student had relied on a thesaurus to improve his word choice, a practice that I urge all my students to embrace. Second, this example is ripe for sharing with other language teachers and would no doubt serve as a springboard into the deeper waters of pedagogy and linguistic development. Third, it reminds me that it is not enough to implore students to use a thesaurus or learn new words. What matters most is how they will use these resources to effectively communicate.

One method to teach students how to use a thesaurus is modeling. Modeling allows you as a teacher to show students step by step how to complete a task. The more overt the explanation, the easier it is for students to follow.

Materials Required

- A sample of three written sentences in which one word is repeated.
 - Examples with the word “pure”
 - The jeweler had to ensure the ring was pure gold before he sold it.
 - A jeweler with pure intentions sells pieces at a fair price.
 - It will be pure luck if the jeweler can sell such an expensive ring.
 - Examples with the word “good”
 - A good teacher knows how to respond to students’ needs.
 - Students give good answers that explore all parts of the question.
 - A good citizen donated a large sum of money to a local school.
- A thesaurus (or copies of the page you want to show students)
- A dictionary (or copies of the page you want to show students)
- Chalkboard, whiteboard, or document cam to display students’ brainstorming

Timing: 20–25 minutes

Step 1

Show students the sample sentences. Have a student read the sentences aloud. Ask students to talk with a partner about how the writer could improve these sentences. (5 minutes)

Step 2

After the partner discussion, ask the entire class for ideas regarding the improvement of the sentences. Write students' input on the board. Continue for 3–5 minutes or until a student mentions the repetition. (5 minutes)

Step 3

Tell students that you're going to show them how best to avoid repeating words in their writing. Look up the repeated word in the thesaurus. (1 minute)

Step 4

Explain to students that when you look up your word, you have to also check to make sure you have the same part of speech, and the appropriate meaning. (5 minutes)

- It might mean “genuine,” which would lead us to substitutes like “authentic,” “natural,” or “real.”

Previous sentence: The jeweler had to ensure the ring was **pure** gold before he sold it.

Rewritten sentence: The jeweler had to ensure the ring was **real** gold before he sold it.

- It might mean “moral,” which would lead to substitutions such as “honest” or “ethical”

Previous sentence: A jeweler with **pure** intentions sells pieces at a fair price.

Rewritten sentence: A jeweler with **honest** intentions sells pieces at a fair price.

- However, it might mean “absolute,” which would lead to substitutions such as “complete,” or “total.”

Previous sentence: It will be **pure** luck if the jeweler can sell such an expensive ring.

Rewritten sentence: It will be **complete** luck if the jeweler can sell such an

expensive ring.

Step 5

Select a word from the thesaurus to replace one of the repeated words. (1 minute)

Step 6

Look up the selected word in the dictionary to ensure it means what you gathered from the thesaurus. In the case of our example sentence, had the writer looked up “holy” in the dictionary, he may have realized that he needed to find a more appropriate word in the thesaurus. (3 minutes)

Optional Extension

An extension of this lesson would involve students practicing the above steps as they write. Then have students model the steps they went through when selecting words from the thesaurus. Students can often explain their reasoning in a way peers understand.

The good news is that Thesaurus-itis is nothing like the common cold. It is avoidable, and its cure is knowable. With a little practice, students will become more astute at choosing words to capture their thoughts.

Happy teaching,

Michelle

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