Better Vocabulary Acquisition: Using Class Logs
by [Johanna Kim](#)

Fellow readers of the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes" may remember the particular strip in which Calvin tells Hobbes that he likes to "verb" words. "I take nouns and adjectives and use them as verbs," he explains. "Verbing weirds language." Hobbes concludes the strip with the disheartening prediction that "maybe one day we can eventually make language a complete impediment to understanding" (Watterson, 1993). It is fair to claim that, as ESOL teachers, we are actively working against the fulfilment of that prediction, and a lesson can be drawn from this strip to aid our work: the meaning of a word is intertwined with its use. Knowing a word entails knowing not just its definition but also its collocations, grammatical features, word parts, and appropriateness (Zimmerman, 2009).

Consider the synonyms *stomach*, *abdomen*, *gut*, and *tummy*. Students who know these words may be able to comprehend or produce sentences like:

> She had butterflies in her stomach before delivering her speech.
> The patient reported severe abdominal pain.
> My friend said *The Fault in Our Stars* was gut-wrenching.
> The little boy told his mom that his tummy hurt.

But if students don't know that *butterflies in one's stomach* and *gut-wrenching* are fixed phrases, that *abdomen* is a noun while *abdominal* is an adjective and both are commonly used in medical contexts, or that *tummy* is typically used by and with young children, they may produce sentences like these:

> She had butterflies in her abdominal before delivering her speech.
> The patient reported severe tummy pain.
> My friend said *The Fault in Our Stars* was stomach-wrenching.
> The little boy told his mom that his gut hurt.

The nuances that determine how each of those synonyms is used cannot be fully mastered in one lesson. Knowing a word is not a product but a process that occurs gradually across repeated exposure, a process that teachers must facilitate (Zimmerman, 2009).

Purpose

One way for teachers to build exposure to relevant words into a course is by having students create an online class vocabulary log throughout a term. Individual vocabulary logs are likely already familiar to many teachers, but the version described here allows for some student-directed learning and contributes to classroom community. It additionally exposes students to vocabulary learning resources they may want to use independently, specifically learner dictionaries and the [Corpus of Contemporary American English](#) (COCA). Utilizing corpus data is an important trend in vocabulary instruction (Zimmerman, 1997).

Materials: Internet access, computers or smart devices, projector	
Audience: Intermediate to advanced students; best for secondary students and above	
Objectives: Students will learn new vocabulary through dictionary and corpus use, short presentations, and attempts to use the new vocabulary	
Outcome: A website record of words students learn during the course	
Duration: 30 minutes to introduce assignment; about 2 minutes for each student presentation throughout the term	

Creating the Log

Set up a webpage that allows students to post content. Discussion pages in online course management systems like Moodle or Blackboard will work. A good free alternative to these websites is padlet.com. To use Padlet, create an account and click "New Padlet." Simply provide the URL of that page to students, and they can post notes without having to create their own account. (A URL will be assigned to the page by Padlet, but it can be renamed for convenience.) Use the menu on the right side of the page to enter a simple title and description so students know they have navigated to the correct page.

Selecting Words

Create sample log entries by choosing words that appear frequently in the course material and that are relevant to the content, context, and student goals. It is important to model for students how to choose relevant words. Suppose students read "He has difficulty swallowing due to a damaged pharynx." *Pharynx*, a technical word, is unlikely to be known, but neither is it necessary to overall comprehension. *Swallow* is much more salient to the meaning of the sentence, and would be a good choice if unknown. Many textbooks provide target vocabulary; this can be a good place for teachers and students to start. Alternatively, Academic Word List words would serve in an intensive English or English for academic purposes program.

Creating Log Entries

As course content is covered, each week students note one to three words they don't understand, look them up in both a learner dictionary and the COCA, and enter them on the vocabulary log. Choose a learner dictionary for students to use. If you have paper copies available, those might be best. Online versions such as Merriam-Webster's or Oxford's would also work.

The COCA has a number of features that are useful to linguists but beyond the needs of language students. For this project, students enter the word in the search bar on the left, hit enter or click search, and then click on the result that appears on the right to view the full list of occurrences. Students browse about 10 examples from various sources (spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, academic) and choose three that show the meaning. To enter the word on Padlet, students simply

go to the page the teacher created, double-click to open a note, and type the information. Each entry should include:

1. the word or phrase
2. the original sentence or context
3. a possible meaning if one can be guessed
4. a fitting definition from a learner dictionary
5. a new sentence the student creates (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014)
6. three example uses of the word found in the COCA
7. other relevant observations, like collocations or frequent use in one type of source

Presentations and Everyday Use

In order for students to continue reviewing and using the words they enter in the log, they present one of their words weekly, using the vocabulary log as a visual aid. Depending on the number of students and the length of the term, a good rate would be three to five presentations per week. The teacher can also choose one to two words from the log each week, display them in the classroom, and award extra credit, bragging rights, or snacks to students who use the words in written work or discussion.

Students should label their written use for the teacher to check. In discussion, a second student can also earn credit by calling out a predetermined phrase, like "log word," before the teacher does so, when a word from the log is used. To preserve the flow of discussion, limit the number of uses that can earn credit to two per day or five per week, for instance.

Conclusion

Though Calvin verbs words for the express, humorous purpose of weirding language, similar use by language students could be stigmatizing, especially if unsupported by broad and deep vocabulary knowledge. This online class vocabulary log can reduce the chances of such an inauspicious outcome by helping students understand not just what words mean but also how they are used.

References

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