Collaborative Writing: An Alternative Vocabulary Assessment
by Jessica Sadler and Yulinda Kusumawati

Giving students choices in their learning is a motivating factor (Renandya, 2014), and tapping into students' creative side, thereby providing choices, doesn't have to end with classroom activities—it can be extended to formal assessment as well. One way of doing this is by using alternative assessments which, according to Brown and Hudson (1998), are performances or creations of something that blend real-world simulation and the essence of familiar classroom activities; their focus is on processes *and* products.

Because alternative assessments can reveal strengths and weaknesses of students' language ability just like (or arguably better than) traditional tests (Renandya, 2014), this article outlines the rationale and procedure for designing an alternative vocabulary assessment that prompts students to use vocabulary creatively in writing while also incorporating collaborative learning.

The tricky part about assessment is figuring out exactly which aspects of the language to evaluate and how to isolate those specific aspects, but teachers know that language skills generally cannot be isolated and that when assessing writing, for instance, the student also employs reading or listening skills if, respectively, a written or verbal prompt is given. To determine how to assess vocabulary, it is helpful to answer this essential question: "What does it mean to know a word?" Folse (2004) outlined the following as features of word knowledge:

- Connotation
- Spelling and pronunciation
- Part of speech and word family
- Knowing the frequency of occurrence
- Syntactic information
- Pragmatic (situational) information
- Common collocations

We would add to that list receptive and productive ability of the target vocabulary—being able to recognize the word within a listening and reading context and being able to apply the word within a speaking and writing context.

Creating the Assessment

For our particular low-intermediate level English students, our vocabulary goals focused primarily on core meaning, part of speech, and receptive and productive ability rather than grammar or form of the target vocabulary. In order to assess exactly these aspects of vocabulary knowledge, we designed an alternative assessment that directs students to work collaboratively to write a brief, one-paragraph descriptive response to a prompt using target vocabulary. The writing prompt is related to the content of the current course unit and creates a meaningful context for the words instead of providing isolated instances in irrelevant contexts.

Students speak English in groups of two or three in order to produce one written response, and group members are chosen by the teacher, by the students, or based on proximity in the

classroom, and this choice rotates throughout the semester. Anecdotally speaking, we have found that students prefer teacher-selected groups because it reduces feelings of exclusion or embarrassment. The writing prompts are usually printed on large paper, and multiple copies are given to each group in order to reduce visibility barriers. The prompt itself is peppered with related images to stimulate thinking and to "bring the outside world into the classroom in a vividly concrete way" (Raimes, 1983, p. 27).

Because this assessment is challenging and requires collaboration, groups usually finish within 50 minutes of a 60-minute class. Students are allowed to use dictionaries to define words other than the target vocabulary—of course, this requires a certain degree of trust between student and teacher.

We have found five key parameters to integrate in the writing prompt:

1. Specify the number of target vocabulary students should apply in their writing and provide the list of all possible target vocabulary in the written prompt;
2. specify the expected length of the written response (e.g., one paragraph);
3. use relevant images, for reasons mentioned above;
4. create a context related to the content being covered in class; and
5. give students an imaginary role or purpose for writing.

Providing students with an imaginary role or purpose for the assessment employs the communicative approach and encourages students to "behave like writers in real life and to ask themselves…crucial questions about purpose and audience" (Raimes, 1983, p. 8).

Sample Prompt and Student Responses

The following is a sample writing prompt incorporating the above five parameters followed by two real group responses:

"Take a look at the map of the town. Your job is to write one paragraph advertising this town to tourists. Use at least seven words from the list of Unit 4 vocabulary words. Also, don't forget to give the town a name!"

Student responses (with target vocabulary underlined); all errors are those of the students:

1. "Happy town! This town is <u>lively</u> because there are many people and shops. These are <u>trendy</u> shops. This town is not <u>silence</u>, so it is very <u>lively</u>. We <u>scaned</u> about this town. This town has <u>ancient</u> history. The people usually <u>commute</u> by car. This town has not <u>mayor</u> but people can <u>solution</u> their problem. Please come this town!"
2. Kota! This town is <u>lively</u>. There are <u>enough</u> public transportation and a lot of <u>trendy</u> stores. The town of night is <u>quiet</u> in <u>silence</u>. So you can sleep well. Noon is noisy. If you live in here you can enjoy <u>urban</u> life. <u>Mayor</u> of the town is kind, he is loved by people. It is easy when you <u>commute</u> to work or school. There are many <u>ancient</u> cultures. Mayor's name is Kota. Please enjoy this town."

In the first sample response, it is easy to determine that students have understood the meaning of the word *lively* in the sentence "This town is lively because there are many people and shops" while it is unclear from the sentence "This town is lively" in the second sample response. For this type of assessment, it is important to teach students how to write sentences that include context clues about the target vocabulary.

Other Sample Prompts

a) Sirichai is very nervous. He's waiting in the business lobby for his first job interview. Help calm him before his interview by writing one paragraph of interview tips and suggestions using five of the unit's vocabulary words. (Suggested images: a student being interviewed, people in business attire sitting in a waiting room)
b) You and your team work at a national park where visitors can camp overnight. Write a warning sign that is one paragraph long for the campers. Your sign should explain some of the dangers of staying in the wooded area using five words from the unit's vocabulary list. (Suggested images: camp site, a person/people around a campfire)
c) Taylor is leaving in 2 days for a backpacking trip through Southeast Asia. Because she must pack light, she needs your help deciding what to bring and what to leave at home. With a partner, give her packing suggestions in one paragraph using six of the unit's vocabulary words. (Suggested images: a woman traveling with backpack, items in a backpack)
d) You and your partner write about restaurants for a local newspaper. You were asked to visit Sunshine Breakfast, a new restaurant in your town. Write a one-paragraph newspaper article about your breakfast using four words from the unit's vocabulary list. (Suggested images: breakfast meal, restaurant)
e) Diego will take an English vocabulary quiz 1 week from now. He wants to do well on the quiz. Give him tips and suggestions about studying for a vocabulary quiz in one paragraph. Use eight of your unit's vocabulary words. (Suggested images: study tools/flash cards, student studying at desk)

Conclusion

Why use collaborative writing to assess vocabulary knowledge? The answer, argued Swain (1985), is that output is a source of vocabulary learning because it requires attention to

vocabulary aspects not needed during listening and reading (as cited in Nation, 2003). Further, learners negotiate meaning, thereby providing comprehensible input on a more individual basis. This assessment activity continues the learning process and accentuates positive assessment washback.

References

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