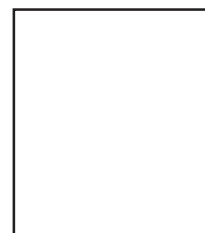


# Vocabulary Instruction: Models Based on Classroom Experiments

**Bhavani. S**

Assistant Professor, Christ University, Bengaluru

Email: bhavani.sanjeeviraja@christuniversity.in



## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper focuses on teacher innovation in teaching vocabulary. It discusses experiments carried out in the classroom to facilitate vocabulary instruction at the undergraduate level. Vocabulary instruction becomes a major challenge for all language teachers as it is a niche within the language teaching domain. Most often the gap exists when vocabulary instruction needs to be executed in a class where a specific course material or book is not provided. This paper identifies some of the suitable methods that can be used in the classroom for vocabulary instruction. The teacher is required to create contexts to help the learners organise lexical items into suitable contexts. Since vocabulary instruction in isolation may not help in sustaining lexical items for long term, the need to customise instructions for various learner groups are identified and presented here.*

**Keywords:** *Creative Pedagogy, Vocabulary Instruction, Lexical items*

## **Introduction**

With a generation of learners coming from a multitude of exposures, the teaching profession is increasingly becoming a challenge in this century. Various attempts to foster and sustain learning among students, sometimes seem a major challenge for teachers. Creative pedagogy might to a certain extent help facilitate better teaching and learning environments. While the idea of creative pedagogy has existed since the introduction of the Aleinikov's (1989) concept, the idea still has a long way to go in terms of implementation; the primary

bottleneck being the acceptance and use of this model in classrooms. Most often creative pedagogies seem to have a sense of disillusionment among teachers and learners. It leaves both parties wondering whether learning has taken place. With the inability to tackle disillusionment, there is often a compromise of classroom methods that teachers adopt. Also in countries where the number of students present in a class are more than fifty, it becomes cumbersome for a teacher to negotiate and implement a strategy to execute creative pedagogies. However, this is not to state that such

methods cannot be used in these classes. The monotony of classroom instruction and activities can see a change with the introduction of this practice.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study are

- to identify suitable creative pedagogical practices that will enable vocabulary building among learners
- to enable teachers to creatively modify and adapt various pedagogical practices to suit heterogeneous classes
- to enable teachers to adapt to creative ways of teaching and help the learners benefit from them

### **Creative Pedagogy**

Creative Pedagogy is just another method adopted by teachers to allow the learners to become active participants in the process of learning. The engagement from both the teachers and the learners, here would be high. The teachers tailor make activities or instructional models to suit the learner groups that they meet with. In large classrooms, where learner involvement is difficult to monitor, this approach could offer some remedy. Creative pedagogy only involves reworking of existing pedagogical practices. It is not to state that a task is entirely novel. Creative pedagogy involves being able to teach creatively. This leaves us with a few important factors that a teacher must consider; generating new ideas to suit a class dynamic, ability of a teacher to shift perspectives in existing methods and

finding something different for the class which is entirely new or elaborate on existing ideas. Being original is highly essential in employing creative pedagogy.

While it is easy to argue that creativity is subjective and difficult to define, one may also want to look at variety and innovation in pedagogy as creative. Creative pedagogy fosters curiosity among learners (Lin, 2011). Whether it is an early level classroom instruction or an advanced level classroom instruction, there is a need to bring in a variety in instruction. Adaptability and novelty are the keys factors in creative pedagogy (Hackbert, 2010). Though there are books that provide models for classroom instructions, there is a need to bring a difference from class to class. What is very important here is the teacher's ability to improvise and innovate (Sawyer, 2006). Every class and its students pose a unique challenge to the teachers and hence it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to think creatively to build and nurture the learning atmosphere. The activities chosen for a class would also require a suitable classroom environment. Appropriate learning environment (Lin, 2011) is also required in order to enable creative learning and expression. Having thus established the concept of creative pedagogy, we would now take a look at some of the practices used in classroom contexts.

### **Classroom Practices**

#### **Vocabulary Instruction:**

Most teachers find teaching vocabulary to be a difficult process. The one simple reason

is that words when taught in isolation seem distant and remote and giving out meanings is not equal to teaching. Moreover, at undergraduate level when many students are likely to be familiar with the words but have difficulty in the usage, the methods need to be different. There could be courses at the undergraduate level that have mandatory English Language and Literature paper or may have a specific English Language paper. In either cases, some of the methods to practice could be as follows;

**Grouping words:** This is a common vocabulary instruction method but generally ignored in conventional classrooms. Grouping words generally involves grouping words of the same category, similar in meaning, similar in context, etc. When learners are directed to group words and label them, the affinity to the words increase, thereby resulting in its usage. Listed below are some of the tried and tested examples:

**a) Grouping words using colour code:** To teach complex words from a text 'The Black Cat' by Edgar Allen Poe, the researcher asked the students of first year Undergraduate course to come with a box of colour pencils/crayons. The instruction

given to the class was to listen to the reading of the text very carefully and underline all complex words in the text with a colour that they think is representative of its meaning. Example – yellow for the word 'docility', red for the word 'sagacious', orange for the word 'equivocal', etc. The text was read by the teacher in the class. Alternately, audio version of the text can also be played. The reading was done with careful voice modulation, tone, stress and pitch. The flow of the reading was also intended to help the learners to pick the right choice of colour for the words in the text. There was no limitation on the use of colours; the students had the liberty to use the colours they felt were suitable to represent a word. After this stage, all complex lexical items in the text were explained to the students with sufficient list of synonyms. The students were asked to see if the colour used by them was relatable to its meaning. In most cases, the students were able to use a relatable colour, though they were not aware of its meaning. This was possible as the students made contextual guesses about the meanings of the words. The students were then asked to group the words as per the colours they had given. The sample list is as follows

| <b>red</b>    | <b>black</b> | <b>green</b> | <b>blue</b>   |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| sagacious     | fiendish     | succinctly   | imperceptible |
| conflagration | vile         | pertinacity  | incumbent     |
| malevolence   | hideous      | expedient    | inscrutable   |
| atrocious     | loathsome    | felicity     | tranquillity  |

The above list is only a model and is not the entire list. The colour connotation is subjective but the grouping should have the logic of connotation. For example, in the list above, all words related to violence, misdeed, hatred are grouped under the colour black. Similar such notations may be done in class with the texts prescribed or texts that teachers choose to take to the class. The task does not end here. Students were then given smaller topics and were asked to write short paragraphs of 100 words using the words in the list. The students were given a choice of using either words under one group or one word from each group for each of the topics. The topics given were as follows-

- 1) Indian Judicial System
- 2) Mob Lynching
- 3) Water Scarcity

The students were able to use the words in context and now the meaning and its usage were clearly embedded in their minds. This practice maybe sustained regularly to reinforce better vocabulary usage.

**b) Grouping words based on topics:** If a course on English Language and Literature has a prescribed textbook, then this is a very useful activity. This particular activity was conducted with students in an undergraduate class for a common paper on English, where they were given various contexts, for example, 'demonetisation', 'bribery', 'women empowerment', etc and were asked to find at least 10 words from the entire book across various texts that can be grouped for each of the contexts. The

grouping was more like brainstorming words to be used for each of the topics. The students had a list like this based on the prescribed textbook used for the English course.

Demonetisation:

Penny-fights from the poem 'Gunga Din' by Rudyard Kipling

Irrevocable from the story 'The Black Cat' by Edgar Allan Poe

Jeopardize from the story 'The Black Cat' by Edgar Allan Poe

Succumbed from the story 'The Black Cat' by Edgar Allan Poe

Blight from the poem 'London' by William Blake

Scrutiny from the essay 'The Death Penalty as a Sign of the Times?' by Santosh Desai (Department of English, 2016).

Having grouped words for each of the topics, the students were then asked to write a short paragraph of 100 words using these words for the respective topics. This kind of activities helps learners understand not just the meanings of the complex words that they get exposed to but also help them in appropriate usage.

**Picture association:** This activity was conducted to teach new words in an Academic Writing paper for the first year BA students. The students were first given a list of 15 words such as abate, capricious, paucity, and disparage. They were then asked to find pictures to represent the

meanings of these words. Some students had newspaper clippings, while some had some images drawn, while some had cut out pictures from some magazines and so on. The words were written and pictures were stuck beside them. The students were then asked to use the words together in a single context. They were given the liberty to choose the topics of their choice. This approach helped the students expand their ideas from a familiar context established through the picture to a new context that they chose to write about. Though these activities seem simple, the result of these activities and their impact in learning are enormous. The meanings of words cannot be taught in isolation and they do not become part of the productive vocabulary of the students unless the students experiment with the words in a multitude of contexts.

**Narrating techniques:** Another helpful approach to help students to use words appropriately is the art of narrating. This model was used in a course called 'Strategic Storytelling' taught by the researcher. The participants were students of the undergraduate Media and Communication programme.

**a) Object and word association:** The students were asked to bring any little object of their choice to the class. The students were then taken to the garden space on the campus and were made to sit in a circle. Each student had to show their object and give one word reference to it. The entire class had done this with objects

like, keychain, badges, pen stands, little souvenirs, feathers, some antiques, etc. The class was asked to make the list of objects and the words they would want to use to represent or refer to for the particular object. This involves making a list of the objects and any corresponding referring term for the object. For example; Feather referred to as tender. Since this was a course on storytelling, the students were asked to create a narrative using all the objects and the words given as reference into one single narrative, there was no compulsion to use the object with the reference word given alone. They were allowed to mix objects and the reference words, but all the words in the list were to be used for a single narrative. An example of the list is as follows-

1. feather-tender
2. pen stand-anchor
3. keychain-auxiliary
4. badges-adhere
5. antiques-value

The students could use the words and the objects listed in any order or combination to create a narrative of their choice, either fictitious or personal. Since this activity involved restriction in the form of words and innovation in the form of a narrative, it allowed students to think creatively but maintain focus with the help of the words. For example; a story about a lost child trying to find her way and her encounters in her journey.

**b) Story board:** The students of the same course also had another vocabulary activity using storybird.com. The students were provided with a list of random words and then were asked to log into the website, storybird.com. They were asked to choose any of the story templates of their choice, and using the list of words given, make as many story panels as possible. The students were able to create a single story using 5 story panels or used a single panel to create a single story. They had a limitation of using only 30 words per panel but had to use all the words provided in the list. This activity again helps students think creatively. In addition, the ready-made story panels available on the website allow them to garner their thoughts and lead to a single focus write-up.

**Conclusion:**

Creative pedagogy provides both the learners and the teachers with a conducive environment to materialise learning. These pedagogical practices have a long term effect. The scope is also multiple as the learners do not merely get familiar with the words but are also trained to think creatively. These activities have a range of

contextual and contemporary relevance and hence keep the students interested and focussed in class. Their ability to be able to express ideas in a short duration, within class hours, and to be able to use the words suitably is sufficient premise to enable learners to improve their lexical development.

**Reference**

Aleinikov, A. G. (1989). On creative pedagogy. *Higher Education Bulletin*, 12, 29-34.

Department of English (2016). *Exploring English-I*. Foundation Books, CUP, New Delhi.

Hackbert, P.H. (2010). Using improvisational exercises in general education to advance creativity, inventiveness and innovation. *US-China Education Review*, 7(10), 10-21.

Lin, Y.-S. (2011). Fostering creativity through education—A conceptual framework of creative pedagogy. *Creative Education*, 2(3), 149-155.

Sawyer, R.K. (2006). Educating for innovation. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 1, 41-48.