Article Title

Teaching vocabulary using short texts 1

Author

Scott Thornbury

Bio Data

Scott Thornbury is freelance teacher trainer and materials writer, who, until recently, directed the ELT Diploma program at International House, Barcelona. His previous experience includes teaching and training in Egypt, UK, and New Zealand. He has an MA (TEFL) from the University of Reading. His writing credits include several books for teachers: About Language: Tasks for Teachers of English (CUP), How to Teach Grammar (Pearson), Uncovering Grammar (MacMillan Heinemann), and How to Teach Vocabulary (Pearson). His latest book for students is called Natural Grammar (Oxford)

Introduction

Traditionally, vocabulary used to be offered to learners in the form of lists. Nowadays, the tendency is to present vocabulary in texts. For vocabulary building purposes, texts - whether spoken or written - have enormous advantages over learning words from lists. For a start, the fact that words are in context increases the chances of learners appreciating not only their meaning but their typical environments, such as their associated collocations or grammatical structures. Moreover, it is likely that the text will display topically connected sets of words (or **lexical fields**). Research evidence suggests that words loosely connected by topic may be easier to learn than more tightly connected lexical sets.

Short texts are ideal for classroom use, since they can be subjected to intensive grammatical and lexical study, without overtaxing learners' attention or memory, as may be the case with longer texts. Learning to cope with short texts is also good preparation for independent reading and listening, including dealing with longer texts. Moreover, short texts provide useful models for student production, in the form of speaking and writing.

A characteristic feature of cohesive texts is that they are threaded through with words that relate to the same topic - what are sometimes called **lexical chains**. This is even more likely if the text is **authentic** - that is, if it has not been especially written or doctored for the language classroom. Here, for example, is a short authentic text that contains a number of **lexical chains**, the main one being a snake chain. Words in this chain are underlined

**Snake sneaks into Auckland suburb**
The hunt is on for a live <u>snake</u> which could be on the loose in Auckland. The <u>reptile</u> has left behind a freshly shed skin in the inner-city suburb of Freeman's Bay. Experts believe it has come from a <u>boa</u> or <u>python</u> nearly two metres long. Ten-year-old Victor McKenney found the skin near his home. "I thought it was like fish scales and then my friend pointed out it looked like snake skin," Victor said. The <u>skin</u> is now being tested at a site near Christchurch but experts believe it is a harmless variety and definitely still alive.

It is not the first <u>snake</u> to sneak into New Zealand this year. In March a poisonous <u>eastern brown snake</u> was found alive in Wellington and two others were discovered dead in Auckland and Wellington.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is worried. Although it is not a dangerous variety, MAF points out that all <u>reptiles</u> could be carriers of bacteria such as salmonella. The MAF <u>snakecatcher</u> team will be out again with dogs in a bid to find the <u>snake</u>. Meanwhile, MAF is urging anyone who spots the missing <u>snake</u> to call 0800-809 966

Intertwined with the *snake* chain is a *hunting chain*, which includes the words: *hunt, on the loose, snakecatcher, dogs, find/found, discovered, missing*. A *skin* chain includes skin ( x 4), *shed* and *scales*. Alive, dead and live form a chain of their own, while *harmless, dangerous and poisonous* form a *danger* chain, to which could perhaps be added carriers, *bacteria* and *salmonella*. Notice how the dominant lexical chains provide a summary of the gist of the story: The *hunt* is on for a *harmless* live *snake* after its *skin* was found.

Activities designed to exploit this characteristic of texts include setting the students the task of identifying the lexical chains for themselves - by, for example, underlining or circling associated words. They can then attempt to identify the type of relationship between words in a chain, such as collocations (*live snake; shed skin; snake skin; fish scales*); synonyms (on the loose, missing; found, discovered); antonyms (*harmless, dangerous);* and hyponyms and their superordinates: *reptile - snake - boa/python/eastern brown snake*. The reader may even note the juxtaposition of snake and sneak - this time a sound relationship, rather than a meaning one. Having done this "lexical detective" work, learners can then attempt either to reconstruct the text from memory, or write a 50-word summary of it.

Different kinds of texts (or **genres**) are likely to display different lexical features. Academic writing, for example, is noted for having a higher proportion of nouns over verbs than non-academic texts. Not only that, but the nouns are often stacked together with adjectives or nouns (or both) to form relatively long sequences, as in this example, in which the compound noun phrases are underlined:

We investigate the suitability of deploying *speech technology* in *computer-based systems* that can be used to teach *foreign language skills*. In reviewing the <u>current state</u> of <u>speech recognition</u> and <u>speech processing technology</u> and by examining a number of voice-interactive CALL applications, we suggest how to create <u>robust interactive learning</u>

environments that exploit the strengths of speech technology while working around its limitations. In the conclusion, we draw on our review of these applications to identify directions of future research that might improve both the design and the overall performance of voice-interactive CALL systems.2

On the other hand, less formal kinds of texts also have their own lexical characteristics. Horoscopes in magazines, for example, are typically rich in idiomatic language, including phrasal verbs. In this example, idioms and idiomatic phrasal verbs have been underlined:

**LIBRA**
23 September - 22 October
**LOVE** A new man on the scene sheds a fresh light on a past relationship and you'll wonder if you can make a fresh start with him. Give it a spin. It won't be the same as the last one.
**AMBITION** Nothing comes easy now with a project, and your instinct is to pack it in. Don't! You'll get your inspiration back when Venus joins Neptune on the 22nd.
**INSIGHT** You hang out with so many people that every now and again you need to hole up and take stock. Deal with those jobs on your 'to do' list and you'll feel back in control.

There are a number of ways these lexical feastures can be exploited. Here, for example, is a procedure that can be applied to both the academic text and the horoscope text:


· Ask learners to skim the text and decide a) what kind of text it is, b) what its purpose is, c) who it is written for and d) what style it is written in (e.g. formal, informal).
· Learners read the text again and are asked to attempt a rough summary of its gist - e.g. "what is it about?" (in the case of the academic text) or "what three pieces of advice are offered?" (in the case of the horoscope).

· Ask learners to find all the examples of the lexical feature that is being targeted - e.g. long noun phrases (in the academic text) or idioms (in the horoscope). To ease the task, you can tell them how many to look for.

· Learners then work out the meanings of the phrases either from their components, or from their context, or both. At this point, they could be allowed to consult dictionaries.

· Alternatively, provide definitions, synonyms or L1 translations of the targeted words, and ask them to find the words in the text that match. For example: Try it. (For Give it a spin).

· Ask leaners to study the targeted items and analyse them in terms of their formal features - e.g. in the academic text, to separate the noun phrases into adjective + noun, or noun + noun combinations, or, in the horoscope, to distinguish between the phrasal verbs and other idiomatic phrases.

· Provide the learners with the same texts, but with the targeted items blanked out. See if they can complete the texts by replacing the items. Alternatively, provide them with a list of the items (including one or two extras, perhaps) to re-insert in the text.

· Ask learners to write their own texts, to include some of the items they have been studying.

So far, we have been looking at only written texts. But spoken language also comprises a wealth of exploitable material. Two lexical features of spoken language that are difficult to teach in isolation are **discourse markers** and **tags**. **Discourse markers** are words or phrases, such as *well, anyway, I mean, I'll tell you what,* that tend to occur at the onset of an utterance and indicate a change in the direction of the talk. Tags, on the other hand, occur at the end of an utterance, either to qualify what has been said (such as I *suppose, actually, really*), or to elicit the listener's involvement (such as isn't it? you know, yeah?). In this extract (between a driving instructor and his client), the discourse markers underlined and tags in italics:

Instructor: All right?
Learner: [Sighs] Yeah [laughs]
Instructor: Well done, Maria, you did well on that lesson. You can switch off now.
Learner: Yeah, great, thank you very much.
Instructor: So how d'you find it okay?
Learner: Yeah, it was great actually.
Instructor: That's good.
Learner: I really enjoyed it. I thought I was more in control
Instructor: You've come on a lot on that lesson actually.
Learner: D'you think so?
Instructor: Yeah. Since the last one even, you know.
Learner: I think the last one was a bad one though. I mean, I felt I wasn't patient you know.
Instructor: Yeah but, you see, you had a gap before that.
Learner: That's why.
Instructor: That's what was wrong really.
[after McCarthy, M., in Coupland, J, *Small Talk*, Longman 2000]

Exactly the same identifying and categorising tasks, as suggested for the academic and horoscope texts, can be applied to a transcript of real talk such as this one. If the talk is recorded, so much the better, since learners can get the benefit of the prosodic features of the text - that is, the stress and intonation.

Finally, short **literary texts** offer multiple possibilities for vocabulary development. It goes without saying that writers and poets choose their words carefully, not only for their meanings but for their formal features as well. (Someone once defined poetry as "the right words in the right order"). Seeing how writers put words to use for their expressive function can only help enrich the network of word associations for the learner. Here, for example, is a poem that imbues rather mundane objects with special significance:

**HANDBAG**

My mother's old leather handbag,

crowded with letters she carried
all through the war. The smell
of my mother's handbag: mints
and lipstick and Coty powder.
The look of those letters, softened
and worn at the edges, opened,
read, and refolded so often.
Letters from my father. Odour
of leather and powder, which ever
since then has meant womanliness,
and love, and anguish, and war.

(Ruth Fainlight, *Selected Poems*, Cassell)

The following lexical features are worth drawing students' attention to (or helping them discover):

· The things in the text, and their relationship, i.e. *handbag* (which contains) *letters, mints, lipstick, powder*, and which is made of *leather*. Students could talk about the things they carry with them, or that they remember their mother or grandmother having.

· The complex noun phrases: *My mother's old leather handbag*; *The smell of my mother's handbag…* Students could construct complex noun phrases along similar lines to describe the things they have talked about previously.

· The describing function of participles: *softened, worn, opened, read, refolded*. Students could describe their own (or remembered) objects using sequences of participles.

· The *sensations* in the text: *the smell of… the look of…* Other expressions that follow this pattern are the *sound of* and *the feel of…* Students could apply these expressions to the objects they have been describing.

· The abstract nouns in the text: *womanliness, love, anguish* and the way these are connected to concrete objects and actions: *womanliness - lipstick, powder; love - letters; anguish - opened, read, refolded.* Students could search for abstract nouns which capture their own emotional associations with the objects they have been talking about.

· The pattern of two syllable words ending in a schwa (unstressed central vowel sound): *moth<u>er</u>, leath<u>er</u>, powd<u>er</u>, lett<u>er</u>, fath<u>er</u>, od<u>our</u>, ev<u>er</u>*. Students could add to this list, especially words that could fit the kind of loose associations created by the poem (*lover, brother, feather, lighter, never,* etc).

Finally students could attempt a "personalised" version of the poem, following a similar pattern:

an extended noun phrase

+

*the smell/look/feel/sound of…*

+

a list of items

+

*the smell/look/feel/sound of…*

+

single item from the list + sequence of participles

+

*Odour/Sound/Appearance/Feel of…*

+

…which ever since then has meant + abstract nouns

The patterned nature of many literary texts, especially poems, and the intricate "web of words" that knits them together, means that the above approach can be generalised to almost any poem. (It is important, at some stage of the process, that learners hear the poem read aloud, in order to appreciate its formal characteristics, such as metre and rhyme).

To summarise, short authentic texts (including literary texts) are rich in vocabulary learning potential. They display words in loose association and also in ways that are typical of their particular text type. Moreover, a large part of their coherence is due to their lexical patterning. Access to the Internet means that such texts are relatively easily available. Compiling a collection of such texts - and encouraging learners to find their own - can provide a valuable resource for learners at all levels.

References
1. This is an edited extract from How to Teach Vocabulary, Pearson Education (2002).
2. http://llt.msu.edu/vol2num1/article3/index.html