

# **Teaching and Learning Vocabulary Using Dictionaries in Communicative Classrooms**

**Songwon Kim,  
International Graduate School of English**

## **I. Introduction**

Much of vocabulary learning and teaching in Korea-if they have been explicitly taught at all-has relied on the provision of lists with one or two L1 equivalents per word for memorization often outside of context, to be tested at a later date. However, this traditional method of learning vocabulary yielded poor results in students' competence in vocabulary. In other words, meaningless, rote memorization seems to have little long-term effect in accumulating words in our brain. Learning a word occurs under the conditions of "meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and fluency development"(Nation, 2001).

This paper is prepared in the hope of demonstrating and suggesting tasks that are chosen and adapted to promote the learning of vocabulary in ways that it can be stored in the long-term memory. Although, there exist countless notable ways of teaching vocabulary that make use of dictionaries in the classrooms, this paper confines its focus on the demonstration of vocabulary learning tasks using dictionaries in communicative classrooms.

## **II. Dictionaries in the Learning and Teaching of Vocabulary**

A large number of teachers have discouraged the use of dictionaries in foreign language classrooms in the past positing that over-dependence on dictionaries would get in the way of developing more useful skills, such as guessing from context. Some people also suggested that the use of bilingual dictionaries would make students rely on their L1 translation instead of developing a separate L2 lexicon (Chi, 2005). Besides, unsystematic and untrained dictionary use may hold the danger of selecting the wrong sense for the meaning that was originally intended (Thornbury, 2002). Specifically, in an EFL classroom, where the teacher is a non-native speaker of the target language, the teacher seems to have a tendency of being self-conscious of

having his/her students refer to the dictionary in fear of having made a mistake in the presence of the students. However, research results indicate differing results when studies were conducted on Japanese students in Japan. Out of the numerous vocabulary learning strategies that the students relied on, the highest percentage (85%) relied upon the use of bilingual dictionaries when discovering meaning (Schmitt et al., 1997). Another study conducted on Korean university students on their strategies concerning vocabulary learning yielded similar results (Lee, 2007).

Thoughts on dictionary usage in the language classrooms have been re-evaluated, and dictionaries have been receiving positive appraisal in that they are second to none when it comes to searching for word information. Especially, the various kinds of learner dictionaries provide valuable information for language learners and can be an important resource for use in classroom activities. Dictionaries have all the right to be used as a basis for activities and tasks in the language classroom, instead of just a source of reference for unknown words in a reading text or listening task (Wright, 1998).

Despite the fact that dictionaries are second to nothing as sources of words, and the information about words, it is rare to find dictionary skills being taught in schools and colleges anywhere (Atkins, 1998). The following is a brief list of why dictionary use should be trained and encouraged:

1. They are a helpful resource for researching different meanings.
2. They are a helpful resource for researching collocations.
3. They are a helpful resource for researching examples of use.
4. They are a helpful resource for researching standard pronunciation.
5. They naturally generate thinking about meaning.
6. They act as a means of exploring personal preferences in learning styles.
7. They help develop learner autonomy.

As opposed to people's general conception on the use of dictionaries in the communicative classrooms, activities using dictionaries will bring notable benefits to the classrooms. Although recent trends in language classrooms tended to emphasize the importance of fluency over accuracy, the introduction of dictionaries in the communicative classrooms will act to promote fluency based on accuracy.

Teachers should not neglect the benefits of using dictionaries. It is a natural part of any skills course that needs to have an appropriate focus and

allocation of time and practice. By encouraging the intelligent and self guided use of dictionaries, learners become more independent-one of the fundamental goals of learning.

### III. Activities

The decision-making tasks as suggested by Thornbury can be divided into the following types (Table 1), arranged in the order starting from the least cognitively demanding. The more of these types that can be performed on a set of words the better:

<b>Task type</b>	<b>Task description</b>
<b>Identifying</b>	Recognizing words from written or spoken (recorded) texts ex) word search
<b>Selecting</b>	Recognizing words + choosing among the given choice of words ex) odd one out
<b>Matching</b>	Recognizing words + paring them with a visual representation, a translation, a synonym, an antonym, a definition, or a collocate ex) verb + noun matching
<b>Sorting</b>	Sorting words into different categories ex) sorting words into positive/negative groups
<b>Ranking &amp; sequencing</b>	Putting words into some kind of order ex) Ranking skill/knowledge in their usefulness in everyday life from a given list

Table 1 Types of decision-making tasks (Thornbury, 2002)

#### 1. Incorporation of Thornbury's Task Types into the Task Framework

The incorporation of Thornbury's typology for decision-making tasks and Willis's framework for tasks will help demonstrate how a plain exercise of choosing a correct word to get the "right" answer, usually allotted by the teacher, can be adapted to perform all (or most) of the types of tasks suggested by Thornbury. By applying this method, the teaching of vocabulary will become communicative in a meaningful way, which will in turn help locate learned vocabulary into long-term memory.

##### 1-1. Devising the task

For the purpose of this demonstration, the simple and well-known exercise of selecting "the odd one out" has been chosen.

First, the teacher will have to provide a supply of words to use in the task. The best scenario would be that there is a ready-made material "at your service" for the teacher to bring into the classroom and use. Better yet, those needed words could simply automatically form in the teacher's head. However, this hardly is the case; it often happens that the teacher will have to produce his/her own words for use, but face difficulty doing so in an impromptu way. Besides, the teacher is the person that knows his/her students' needs and levels the best including the words that need to be taught. So, it is best that the teacher creates the lists as needed. There could be several ways to hunt for the words, but since most teachers suffer from time constraints, a comparatively trouble-free method of using the thesaurus provided within the Microsoft Office Word program-2007 version-along with a learner's dictionary- the Online Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2007)-will be introduced.

Say, a lexical set of various adjectives describing people's characters are needed to be taught. Even if the only words that the teacher can imagine off the top of his/her head happen to be the most basic terms that would describe a person's character, "good" and "bad," with the help of the thesaurus, many other words describing people's characters can be produced.

First, start the Microsoft Office Word program and open a new document page. Press the <shift> + <F7> keys to activate the built-in thesaurus, and a thesaurus window will appear on the right-hand side of the screen. Type in "good" in the search box, then fifty-nine results will appear. Starting from there, additional related words can be derived by clicking in further for the teacher to choose from. Either note down the words that are considered worthy of using, or better yet, copy and paste onto the document. The same can be done with the word "bad."

The next procedure that is recommended is to use the learner's dictionary for clarification of the meaning, usage, and most of all, information on whether it is formal or informal, and whether it is approving or disapproving in its connotation. Most learner's dictionaries provide this kind of information.

While the word "meticulous," meaning "very careful and with great attention to every detail" is "approving" in its connotation, its synonym "fussy," meaning "not easily satisfied; having very high standards or very fixed standards about

particular things" is "disapproving" in its connotation. Don't forget to copy and paste this information along with the definitions and example sentences onto your document during this process. This will help save the time and trouble of having to go back again for the same information after the final list of words is created.

## 1-2. Implementing the task

With the chosen words to be used—*careful, meticulous, fussy, cold, sly, shrewd, funny, lazy, thoughtful, patient, rude, polite, quiet, sensitive, confident, tidy*—tasks will have to be created.

### 1.2.1. Pre-task—Identifying

- a. Try to find an interesting video or text that contains some adjectives from the Internet, or create one yourself. It would be great if all the words that have been chosen were in the material, but this would be hardly likely unless it is created in person. For example, the following video available from [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) may be used in order to introduce the topic of the lesson as a pre-task stage and get students to identify some adjectives in the video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYzGLzFuwxI>.

- b. With an OHP or Powerpoint screen, display the list of vocabulary along with an example sentence per word. Tell them to guess the meaning through the sentences given. Ask students to briefly choose an adjective that best describes them. Have them look up the dictionary for unknown words, paying attention to the connotations of each word looked up. Tell the students that they will be doing some decision-making tasks with this vocabulary list. The following table is an example of the example sentences:

Careful	Michael is a very careful worker.
Meticulous	Many hours of meticulous preparation have gone into writing the book.
Fussy	He's so fussy about the house - everything has to be absolutely perfect.
Cold	His handshake was cold, and his eyes lifeless.
Sly	He's a sly old devil - I wouldn't trust him with my money.
Shrewd	She is a shrewd politician who wants to avoid offending the electorate unnecessarily.
Funny	She's a funny girl./ I've never found Charlie Chaplin very funny.
Lazy	He's too lazy to walk to work.
Thoughtful	She's a very thoughtful person.
Patient	Be patient with her - she's very young.
Rude	He's got no manners - he's rude to everyone.
Polite	He was too polite to point out my mistake.
Quiet	He was a quiet, almost taciturn, young man.
Sensitive	In the movie, he plays a concerned and sensitive father.
Confident	She's very timid, - completely lacking in (self-)confidence.
Tidy	My room-mate isn't very tidy.

**Table 2 List of example sentences to be used during the pre-task-Identifying stage**

### 1.2.2. Task-Selecting

Have students work in pairs to choose the "odd one out" from each of the three groups of words presented to them in the following box. Let them know that there is no "right" answer to the task, but a logical rationale for their choices has to be given. This phase is the core segment of the whole task framework, since the students get to use the target vocabulary in a meaningful way through the process of natural communication, trying to convey their thoughts in the target language. Encourage them to be creative. Have each team prepare and report to the rest of the class.

1. sensitive	thoughtful	shrewd	careful
2. meticulous	cold	patient	quiet
3. sly	funny	fussy	rude

### 1.2.3. Task-Matching

Create a box of antonyms for the original list of words. Have students match them in pairs, first, without the aid of the dictionary. Have them look up their dictionaries to check their answers. Here again, the students should be allowed to produce alternative answers as long as they can justify their choice. The following box contains the list of antonyms:

indifferent, sloppy, reckless, easy, warm, honest, naive, serious, energetic, thoughtless, impatient, polite, impolite, loud, insecure, messy
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### 1.2.4. Task-Sorting

Have the students sort the words into three categories- positive, negative, and neutral in pairs. They can express disagreements to each other while they are doing the task. Remember, a positive character at one place may not be so welcomed at another.

### 1.2.5. Task-Ranking and Sequencing

Tell the students to put the personalities in order of preference when choosing a spouse. When they are done making their individual list of choices, have them compare and explain their order to a partner. Tell the students that they should be planning to report the results of their choices and their rationale to the rest of the class.

#### IV. Other Useful Sources for Producing Vocabulary Lists

Although most off-line and on-line dictionaries are rich sources for searching word meaning, usage, collocation, and connotation, most online dictionary sites provide limited help when it comes to searching for a word with just a vague definition. However, with the reverse dictionary function in [www.onelook.com](http://www.onelook.com), searching words using the definition (or an approximation) is possible. For instance, if you are looking for a lexical set for *walking*, and the various words that express the different kinds of walking cannot be produced in an impromptu way, you can simply visit the onelook.com website and type in "walk slowly," "walk fast," "walk in water," etc. in the search box, and look up the results. Through this process, a lexical set of walk can be produced for the teacher to manipulate. The following captured image will provide a brief overview of the site:



Figure 2 Search result for " \*:walk in water " in [www.onelook.com](http://www.onelook.com), Reverse Dictionary function.

For some searches, only the first few results are likely to be useful. Therefore, it is necessary to click on the definition and check whether it is appropriate for use in relation to the intended purpose before employing the words to the task.

Phrasal verbs can be changed to single verb equivalents, and vice versa through the use of the built-in thesaurus in the Microsoft Office Word program. For example, if "come out" is typed in the search box, you will see "appear," "surface," "emerge" displayed in the window as a result, and again, typing in "emerge" will provide "come out" along with other synonyms.

For those teachers who are seriously pressed for time in preparing for the lesson, the following sites will provide you with some useful materials for teaching, including some ready-made lexical sets:

- Provides ESL materials, quizzes, lesson plans <http://esl.about.com/>
- Crossword puzzle helper, anagram solver, vocabulary quiz builder and glossary maker [www.wordsmyth.net](http://www.wordsmyth.net)
- Dictionary games based on topic word lists, linked to various dictionaries [www.manythings.org](http://www.manythings.org)

## V. Conclusion

The use of communicative approaches and dictionaries as a tool and a resource in the learning and teaching of vocabulary promotes classroom tasks that involve various decision-making and communicating using the target vocabulary on the part of the students, which in turn will aid in transferring learned vocabulary into long-term memory. This approach can be identified as "killing three birds with one stone": The task of learning speaking skills, vocabulary skills, and dictionary reference skills can all be tackled in one setting.

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**Songwon Kim**

e-mail: [songblue33@igse.ac.kr](mailto:songblue33@igse.ac.kr)

Mobile: 011-9134-2507