Teaching Advanced Learners Post 3: Vocabulary
Rachel Appleby

There are countless books and activities focused on developing students’ vocabulary, many of them topic-based. While these can be very useful, with groups of advanced level students, one topic may not suit another student, so I like to work on areas which are transferable across topic areas: these include word building, prefixes and suffixes, in-/formal language, collocation, paraphrasing, words with dependent prepositions and so on. And, as with grammar, promoting peer support and peer teaching works well with vocabulary at higher levels. Below are a few things I do.

For building a lexical base, as well as consolidating and recording vocabulary, word tables which students complete with other parts of speech within the same word family are useful (e.g. to relate, relative, relation, relationship, related, relatively etc.). At this level, it’s obviously important to ensure students are aware of the similarities and differences in meaning, and of how these words are used in practice. For example, with the above words, relative can be both a noun (a family member: ‘I’ve got relatives in the States’), as well as an adjective (‘They now live in relative comfort (compared to before’) Vocabulary records in themselves can be a good aide memoire, and can include, in a table, information such as part of speech, definition, example sentence, pronunciation, (translation,) etc. To make such activities less dry, I might get students working in pairs or small groups, or circulating tables in class to complete.

To help develop students’ independence, activities which encourage dictionary work, and the use a concordancing programme for checking how words are used in context, can be effective. I have a few sites I like to try, specifically with non content words.

Work on prepositions can usefully be done with a dictionary (e.g. try www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com). For example, off is listed not only as a preposition but also as an adjective, adverb, noun and verb; such words can carry a lot of meaning, replacing a more formal word or phrase. Consider these examples (off as a preposition): It smells strange; do you think it’s off? She’s had a week off school. I’m off sugar for a month. Helping students understand these, by making accessible a context, and then giving them a word/phrases mixed up to replace the prepositions with (e.g. ‘bad’; ‘away from’; ‘not eating/drinking’) helps them work out meaning for themselves, and access plenty more everyday English as they do so.

Students can also research the use of other ‘little words’ which have a multitude of meanings in English, such as say, like, so and well. This can be done by giving each pair of students one word, asking them to look it up in a concordancing programme (e.g. www.lextutor.ca), and ‘mining’ the results, e.g. analyzing what sorts of words (and in what forms) come before/after the word, and working out the different meanings they have. If students can then draw some conclusions (‘rules’) from their findings, you could ask them to relate the words to their own situations, using the words in sentences: personalizing language helps internalize it. The same sort of activity can be done with pairs of words which are often confused, e.g. so-such, practically-in practice and shortly-in brief. I find that working with clear examples in context that differentiate meaning and use helps students use these more accurately.
I use a vocabulary box at all levels, and advanced learners need repetition too to remember and be able to use new words, so I try to do a five- or ten-minute vocabulary activity at the start or end of each lesson. One of my students’ favourites is a ‘definitions mingle’, where students each take a word (ones you want to revise), and have to elicit it through explanation/example from their partner; when both have guessed each other’s words, they swap, and find a new partner, and so on. Students can also group words into categories (of their own choice), find synonyms and/or opposites, use, e.g. five words to tell a story, find a link between random words, and so on.

For me, what makes vocabulary fun at higher levels is enabling students to play around and explore words for themselves; and despite being adults, and often professionals, they still enjoy the game-like element of some of these relatively simply activities. It’s in this way, I think, that they start building their own relationship with the words. What better way to remember them!

Rachel Appleby is a freelance teacher and teacher trainer. She has worked for International House, the British Council, and at ELTE University in Budapest. She has run Professional Skills training course, is a CELTA and LCCI trainer, and also trains on the OUDE / British Council EMI course for tertiary level. Rachel is co-author of the Business one:one series and two levels of the new edition of International Express. She has also written teacher’s books for Business Result Advanced, and International Express Upper Intermediate, and has also been involved in the new 6-level series Navigate. Feel free to follow her on Twitter (@rapple18).