

## **Pre-AP Strategies for Mastering Foreign Language Vocabulary**

Linda Keown  
Central Methodist University  
Fayette, Missouri

Obviously, none of our students can become proficient in a second language without a vocabulary base. They cannot speak without contextually appropriate words and cannot understand what is being said if they do not comprehend the spoken words. Nor can they understand what they are reading without knowing the meaning of the text, and writing without a learned vocabulary bank is impossible. As teachers, we must ask ourselves how to best present vocabulary so that our students can succeed in all aspects of foreign language study. The methods we choose in our instruction cannot be at all like the ones we used to learn our first language—we are not always surrounded by the foreign language in our daily lives. Rather, we are in a classroom for only measured increments of time over the length of the academic year. Our teaching strategies must accordingly provide special ways to guarantee success.

Most beginning foreign language textbooks have thematic-based units with vocabulary related to the themes. Words are introduced by pictures, context, or association and are then recycled in speaking, writing, and reading exercises. Teachers often use the vocabulary words in their classroom instruction so that students' aural skills are strengthened as well. However, developing a vocabulary list alone—regardless of whether the students are asked to define or memorize the list—is not sufficient. Students must incorporate the words into their word banks by using them repeatedly. Once they can “claim” the word—that is, use it correctly both semantically and syntactically in spoken and written form—they can begin to demonstrate mastery of the word. Vocabulary assessments must also move beyond lists and definitions and target higher-order thinking skills requiring appropriate word usage in meaningful dialogues.

More sophisticated vocabulary mastery (such as the skills required for success on AP Exams in foreign languages) involves analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—in other words, the upper range of Bloom's levels of thinking. We want students to write cogent essays, to read and understand difficult passages where unfamiliar vocabulary may appear, and to express themselves with a wide range of descriptive and precise vocabulary. These are the challenges of the AP Exams. And these are the skills that colleges expect of students scoring in the upper ranges on an AP Exam. As reported both in *Time* magazine and on National Public Radio on November 8, 2004, more

## Focus on Pre-AP for World Languages

and more colleges are rethinking their policies toward AP Exams for credit because students who are “taught for the test” may not have college-level thinking abilities. Our goal should be proficiency and long-term vocabulary retention skills as well as the application of those skills beyond the scope of the AP Exam. The results students obtain on AP Exams in world languages should serve as a measure of their level of proficiency, warranting college placement and credit. That proficiency can be greatly enhanced by using teaching methods that foster the active use of content, which can lead to greater retention of the material being taught.

The AP Exams do require students to produce vocabulary under pressure, that is, to write and to speak within a time limit, which can be a daunting task for even the most valiant. Their success in foreign languages depends on how we present vocabulary so that the words become natural in their lexicon. Crucial for vocabulary mastery is word retrieval. Students must be asked to recall word meanings repeatedly and to use the words in their speaking and writing. The teacher must structure classroom activities so that frequency is emphasized. In beginning courses, we must provide students with the skills to succeed in writing and speaking; recycling, reintroducing, and recalling words are essential. Language is a cumulative skill, and the material learned at the beginning level is the basis for progress at more advanced levels. If our goal is to demonstrate proficiency on an AP Examination, we must begin to build the necessary skills prior to level 3 or 4 courses.

Beyond providing the textbook’s thematic lists of words for students to memorize (travel, foods, sports, family, weather, etc.), ask students to compose original sentences with new vocabulary by grouping the words according to the parts of speech they represent. Also, provide the necessary grammatical components of a sentence—giving students the vocabulary list divided into groups of verbs, nouns, and adjectives—so that simple sentences are bound to be correctly formed. In other words, provide the framework so that students will succeed with their first attempts.

In more advanced classes, ask students to determine the commonality of the words, for example, what is the topic of the reading passage? Then ask students to categorize the words by parts of speech and have them apply the new vocabulary by writing paragraphs that employ the new words. Because they know the context of a new word, students may be able to guess at a probable meaning and later determine the meaning by using a dictionary. Advanced learners can also strengthen their vocabulary mastery by learning the component parts of the words—prefixes, roots, and suffixes—and determining their meaning. Fourteen thousand words in Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary are made of only 20 prefixes and 14 roots (Rubin and Thompson 1994).

A good dictionary can be invaluable for learners of a foreign language, and knowing how to use a good dictionary is a skill teachers need to stress. We have all experienced unintelligible sentences produced by well-meaning students attempting to use a dictionary to write creatively. A prime example from my experiences in the classroom came from an adventuresome eighth grader trying to tell me “I like cats” in Spanish. His sentence read, “*Yo como gatos,*” where *yo* = I, *como* = like or as (a comparative form but not the verb “to like”), and *gatos* = cats. Because of a double entendre in Spanish, the sentence actually reads “I eat cats,” because *como* = I eat from the verb *comer*. Only a teacher would see the humor and irony in such a sentence! Because our students, in most cases, are woefully unaware of English grammar and dictionary abbreviations, we need to teach those basics as part of our foreign language courses. Learning words by parts of speech as well as learning them thematically can strengthen the correct *usage* of the internalized vocabulary.

**Sample Vocabulary Activity Using a Dictionary**

| Word                   | Context | Dictionary | Original form in dictionary | Part of speech in dictionary | Meaning in dictionary | Translation in context |
|------------------------|---------|------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. <i>comiera</i>      |         | X          | <i>comer</i>                | verb                         | to eat                | He might eat           |
| 2. <i>generalmente</i> | X       |            | <i>generalmente</i>         | adverb                       | generally             | generally              |
| 3.                     |         |            |                             |                              |                       |                        |
| 4.                     |         |            |                             |                              |                       |                        |
| 5.                     |         |            |                             |                              |                       |                        |
| 6.                     |         |            |                             |                              |                       |                        |
| 7.                     |         |            |                             |                              |                       |                        |
| 8.                     |         |            |                             |                              |                       |                        |
| 9.                     |         |            |                             |                              |                       |                        |

## Focus on Pre-AP for World Languages

One good strategy to enhance dictionary usage and vocabulary mastery is creating a list of words that students need to know to comprehend a reading selection. The teacher selects the words that are considered essential (column 1). The students are asked to indicate how they came to understand the meaning of the new words (columns 2 or 3). They must then look up the words in a dictionary and give the forms of the words that appear in the dictionary—either the words themselves or the base of the words (column 4). This helps the students identify root words for unknown vocabulary. The parts of speech are identified (column 5) along with the meaning of the words found in the dictionary (column 6). Finally, the students must write their contextual meaning, indicating the correct translation using their grammatical knowledge (column 7).

The advantage of such an exercise is that the teacher can tailor a vocabulary list based on the students' specific needs and abilities in grammar knowledge, content comprehension, and vocabulary skills. Such an exercise also forces students to think, and it teaches them to rely upon what they already know when identifying the basis of unfamiliar words. The ability to transfer these skills to the AP Examinations will help students when they are challenged with unfamiliar vocabulary in reading and writing exercises typically included in the examinations. The usefulness of this grid exercise can be further amplified by asking students to write original sentences using specified words from the list.

Lastly, remind beginning and intermediate students to pack their bags well for the long journey. Teachers should help students identify learning strategies (making flash cards, creating lists, drawing pictures, and/or studying new words out loud) that are most effective for them; these strategies can reinforce the teacher's classroom efforts, especially in the area of enhancing vocabulary retention. These strategies must be taught by the teacher or shared by classmates who have honed them to success. And while making students responsible for daily vocabulary review outside of class is a key element to long-term recall, how that vocabulary is put to authentic, communicative use within the classroom is the capstone to developing meaningful and lasting skills that will serve students well on the AP Exam, in their postsecondary studies, and beyond.

**References**

Rubin, Joan and Irene Thompson. 1994. *How to Be a More Successful Foreign Language Learner*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Folse, Kenneth. 2004. The Underestimated Importance of Vocabulary in the Foreign Language Classroom. *CLEAR News* 8 (2): 1-6.

2004. *Time*, (November 8) 54-56.

Robert Siegel (host). 2004. *All Things Considered*. National Public Radio (November 8).