**Tutoring Vocabulary–Guidelines** *(6-14-20)*

by Ann Ludlow

1. The differences between **oral vocabulary, academic vocabulary**, and **technical vocabulary are** key concepts in ESL pedagogy. All are important:   
      
   **Oral vocabulary** is vocabulary that you learned as a kid while talking with others.    
   **Academic vocabulary** is vocabulary that you learned the meaning of (but not necessarily the pronunciation of) through wide reading. Academic vocabulary includes useful words like “ambivalent,” “ambiguous,” “to foster something,” “to generalize,” etc.   
      
   **Technical vocabulary** is the many terms that teachers highlight by explaining them orally and that textbooks show in bold print, italics, or color.   
      
   Your tutees may wish to focus on understanding oral vocabulary and technical terms in their reading. You should know, however, that the TOEFL Test and Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, both tests used by advanced ESL students to get into U.S. colleges, focus on academic vocabulary. The verbal sections of the SAT and ACT tests also focus on the correct meaning of academic vocabulary in context.

Many ESL students from educational systems that focus on memorization often try to memorize academic vocabulary. However, wide reading, particularly of online newspapers, is a much better way to learn academic vocabulary. It also helps increase tutees’ reading fluency/speed, which is critical for college study in any language.

1. For memorizers, here is a famous source of academic vocabulary:

<https://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/academic-word-list-tool>

Another online tool that your tutees can use for free to memorize vocabulary that either you or they select to learn is [www.quizlet.com](http://www.quizlet.com). Like the word list above, it also generates games and tests to make memorizing vocabulary more fun. Quizlet has a smartphone app, too. (This is the site I used with my students.) There are other free vocabulary sites online in the U.S., probably in China, too.

1. One of the best fun sources of relatively easy wide reading for teens and adults in English is *News for You*: [www.newreaderspress.com/news-for-you-online](http://www.newreaderspress.com/news-for-you-online). Click on its Free Resources to Print in the right-hand column to view sample issues on the census and voting. You and your tutees can also try it for free for two weeks. As you will see, its issues are written at about a sixth-grade reading level, but from an adult viewpoint. I had my ESL students buy it for a semester. I used it as the basis for conversations with advanced students—those who found it reasonably effortless for independent reading. After advanced students had read an issue, I also used part of a selected article for an old-fashioned dictation. I think dictations are one of the best ways you can help your tutees connect oral English to what correctly written English looks like—or vice versa!

Of course, for intermediate ESL students, *News for You* is a great primary text. Bear in mind, though, that ANY reading material in which your tutees don’t already know the meaning of 97% of the words will need extra work: you will have to pre-teach specific vocabulary or your tutees—or the two of you together—will need to look words up. Except for the most motivated tutees, independent and recreational reading can quickly become tedious if your tutees know the meaning of less than 97% of the words.

1. Also, in my opinion—discovered repeatedly as a frustrated but well-advanced user of both oral and written German and French—your tutees will be able to guess accurately at the meaning of only 30% of the unfamiliar vocabulary from context.   
     
   The technical term “using context clues” in reading pedagogy means making a guess about the meaning of a word using “clues” around it—comparing it to other words and ideas around it. In my opinion, if your tutees haven’t already mastered the meaning of 97% of the words they are reading, then you will probably vastly overestimate the usefulness of such context clues for accurately understanding the specific meaning of words. Your tutees will, however, be able to use context clues to make reasonably accurate judgments about which words are not worth the time to look up.
2. The structure for news reports in English is not the same as the structure for textbooks and essays. News reports use a format of “Who? What? Where? When? Why/How?” that I’m sure you were taught in K-12. Perhaps it should have been included in the “Tutoring Guidelines handout. Newspapers in China may not follow this format, so you should stress the structure of English news reports the first time if you have your tutees read news reports. Actually, in the U.S., articles that focus on “Why”? or How?” usually follow several days/weeks later than initial news reports. Articles that answer those two questions are usually labeled as analyses, opinions, and editorials.
3. You should encourage your tutees who are advanced enough to read widely in regular online newspapers—and if they’re rich enough—to read online newspapers in English with a laptop/tablet and smartphone *together*. In my opinion, the best dictionaries in English today are online. My students use their smartphones to access their favorite dictionary and then look up unfamiliar words on their phone so they don’t disturb the online text they are reading.
4. In my opinion, the best ESL monolingual American online dictionaries are Google and

[www.oup.com/elt/oald](http://www.oup.com/elt/oald) -- *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary Online*

<http://tesl-ej.org/ej14/m3.html> -- *The Newbury House Dictionary*

[www.enchantedlearning.com](http://www.enchantedlearning.com) -- *English Picture Dictionary*

[www.online-dictionary.net](http://www.online-dictionary.net) -- Lists foreign language and medical dictionaries

Your tutees probably already have one or more favorite online Chinese-English dictionaries.

1. If you’re working with tutees mainly interested in improving their oral English, online audio of traditional or currently popular songs/rap tapes + their written lyrics is a fun way for tutees to learn how English uses pauses, intonation, and stress in speech. Lyrics are widely available online. Be sure to show your tutees the lyrics so they don’t understand “the rockets red glare” in the national anthem as “the rockets red hair”!
2. If your tutees are advanced enough to find learning Latin and Greek prefixes and roots a useful shortcut to guessing at or learning unfamiliar academic and technical vocabulary, then [www.onelook.com](http://www.onelook.com) may help. It contains many dictionaries, some of which explain the Latin and Greek origins of English academic and technical vocabulary. A former advanced ESL student taught me about this website, which I’ve used with both native and advanced ESL students ever since.