Parole per parlare: *Teaching/Expanding the Student's Basic Vocabulary*

PART I: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As Robert Galisson aptly wrote, "Jusqu'à preuve du contraire, les mots restent bien utiles pour communiquer." And yet, textbooks used to teach languages appear to focus mainly on the teaching/learning of grammar, using only those lexical items that are suitable to drill the morphology and syntax taught in that lesson or that facilitate the understanding of the reading selection presented. Since the learning of a language is most commonly identified with acquiring mastery of its grammatical system, it is not at all surprising that most textbooks have a grammatical or 'structural' organization. As a result, the introduction of vocabulary that could be used by the learner in everyday conversations is often omitted or neglected (Meara, 1980). Textbooks written for the learning of Italian should base their introduction of vocabulary on a high-frequency word list. Unfortunately, the excellent works currently on the market — *Vocabolario fondamentale della lingua italiana* (Sciarrone, 1977, 1995), the Council of Europe's *Livello soglia per l'insegnamento dell'italiano come lingua straniera* (De' Paratesi, 1981), the *Lessico di frequenza dell'italiano parlato* (De Mauro, Mancini, Vedovelli, and Voghera, 1993), and the more recent *DIB: dizionario di base della lingua italiana* (De Mauro, Morini, and Cattaneo, 1996) — are rarely mentioned or virtually ignored as a useful foundation in the writing of language textbooks. It is not surprising, therefore, to find, in a well-known textbook widely used in American classrooms, the word *cenotafio* but not the word *forchetta* or *cucchiaio*.

The problem is that the choice in the selection of vocabulary is made by the authors of the textbook and they often do not address all the needs of the learners. When all the needs are not addressed, students find themselves compelled to search among the myriads of print and non-print materials available separately to teach lexical items at both elementary and advanced levels (Liebowitz, 1988; Danesi, 1990; ELI, 1996; Berlitz, 1998; Mezzadri, 1998; Lizzadro *et al.*, 2000).

As Jana Vizmuller Zocco (1985:13) correctly points out, "It has been tacitly assumed by many instructors that reading literary works is one of the best methods for students in advanced courses to learn new vocabulary." and observes that "Given the fact that students in advanced language courses possess a certain grammatical competence, one of the most pressing objectives of such a course is to help them increase their

lexical competence." Stephen Krashen (1989:440), too, concurs that ". . . the best hypothesis is that competence in spelling and vocabulary is most efficiently attained by comprehensible input in the form of reading, a position argued by several others."

There is no question in my mind that the reading of literary works does, in fact, increase the students' vocabulary but often that vocabulary, while suitable to discuss intelligently a specific literary work in class, becomes useless in meeting the learners' immediate needs to communicate in the target language outside the classroom environment unless that 'literary text' has been carefully chosen so that it can be used as a point of departure to expand the students' basic communicative vocabulary. But this is almost never the case. Editors of such literary texts, in addition to the usual reading-comprehension questions, often prepare exercises that focus on the review or the teaching of grammar. Grammar has been taught so that students are able to read literary texts and now literary texts are being used to teach or review grammar. It is a vicious circle from which there seems to be no escape.

I have long held the view — and reflected the view in publications (Mollica 1973, 1976; Mollica and Convertini, 1979) — that

> The aim of the reading program . . . should be the further development of oral and reading skills in the study of good literature. Although it is essential to read for accurate comprehension, teachers should avoid excessive grammatical analysis, word study or translation. . . . Synonyms, antonyms, definitions, diagrams, and gestures can prepare the student for a more profitable and pleasurable reading assignment. Word study should be done only to help the student understand, not as goal in itself. (Mollica, 1971:522)

Synonyms, antonyms, definitions and word study, then, should be done not only to understand the reading material but also *to increase* the students' basic vocabulary. The goal of second-language teaching is to provide students with the necessary means to enable them to communicate in the target language. But when students attempt to express themselves in that language they are often frustrated, and their production shows a lack of fluency that is characterized by long hesitations. They find it difficult to retrieve the vocabulary that has been taught and generally resort to circumlocutions to express their meaning. While this is a laudable initiative, it is hoped that students would be able to learn and recall the *mot juste,* which a native speaker would use. It follows that any vocabulary presented to students must respond to their interests and to their needs to communicate.

According to Michael Wallace (1982:27), in order to 'know' a word in the target language as well as a native speaker knows it, learners must have the ability to:

(a) recognize it in its spoken or written form;
(b) recall it at will;
(c) relate it to an appropriate object or concept;
(d) use it in the appropriate grammatical form;
(e) in speech, pronounce it in a recognizable way;
(f) in writing, spell it correctly;
(g) use it with the words it correctly goes with, i.e., in the correct collocation;
(h) use it at the appropriate level of formality;
(i) be aware of its connotations and associations.

The goal of a meaningful language course should be, in effect, what Danesi and Mollica (1998; Danesi, 1999) call 'conceptual fluency.' Conceptual fluency is the ability to control the range of meanings that words and various structures encompass. The range varies from the *concrete* (i.e., being able to name objects on a desk, for example) to the *abstract* (being able to talk about abstractions such as 'justice' and 'love'). This entails imparting knowledge of how the target culture encodes its concepts in rhetorical as well as literal ways. For example, *to fall in love* in Italian is based on different imagery from English. 'Innamorarsi' does not imply a 'falling motion.' Hence when students say something such as **Sono caduto in amore*, they are relying upon their conceptual system that is highly rhetorical and grounded on generic metaphorical competence.

PART II: METHODOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS

How can we, as teachers, facilitate the acquisition of *new* lexical items? How do learners acquire a *wider* knowledge of vocabulary? The following is a series of strategies that are bound to assist both the teacher and the learner in the teaching/learning of vocabulary.

Cognates

English-speaking students can acquire a great deal of vocabulary if they are made aware of the close relationship that exists between certain English and Italian words. The endings of some English words may be changed into Italian endings and, as a result, an Italian word can be formed. While articles and books on the use of cognates for the teaching of vocabulary have been written for German (Banta, 1981) and for Spanish (Madrigal, 1951; Garrison, 1990), few Italian textbooks have identified these affinities and those authors who do introduce cognates never provide an exhaustive list. In teaching German vocabulary, Banta (1981:129) regrets the lack of emphasis that teachers place on cognates and asks,

> Do we make it sufficiently clear to our students that German and English are close relatives? Do we make them usefully aware of the linguistic community that is Western Europe and all its wide-spread former colonies?

Do we really train them for intelligent guessing when they meet new words? Not really enough.

The questions that Banta raises for German are equally applicable to Italian. Garrison (1990:509–10) believes that a list of cognates can be very productive on the very first day of an introductory class and that

> It encourages timid students by showing them that they already know many words in Spanish and that they can easily learn many more. It provides a good first lesson in pronunciation, because differences between the sound system of the two languages become dramatically apparent when cognates are compared.

The following list shows several English endings which, if replaced by Italian endings, can form Italian words. Because of space restrictions, only three examples are given for each ending. The endings are listed in alphabetical order for easy reference; we would suggest a grouping of these endings according to their frequency use, however.

Eng. ending	Ital. ending	Examples
able	evole	favorevole, durevole, onorevole
al	ale	animale, generale, rivale
ant	ante	importante, elegante, elefante
ary	ario	contrario, necessario, ordinario
ble	bile	impossibile, terribile, nobile
cal	co	politico, indentico, comico
ct	tto	aspetto, effetto, diretto
cy	zia	democrazia, diplomazia, aristocrazia
ent	ente	agente, recente, differente
fy	ficare	identificare, modificare, semplificare
ic	ico	diplomatico, ironico, tragico
ine	ina	marina, nicotina, eroina
ist	ista	artista, pianista, dentista
i've	ivo	attivo, decisivo, furtivo
ly	mente	finalmente, generalmente, naturalmente
nce	nza	differenza, distanza, violenza
ncy	nza	tendenza, emergenza, decenza
or	ore	dottore, errore, professore
ory	orio	conservatorio, territorio, dormitorio
ous	oso	curioso, odioso, numeroso
sion	sione	confusione, decisione, passione
tion	zione	descrizione, direzione, cooperazione
ty	tà	agilità, società, unità
ure	ura	avventura, cultura, tortura
ute	uto	astuto, bruto, minuto
y*	ia	melodia, ironia, cortesia

*preceded by a consonant other than 't.'

Students should be made aware that some words undergo some spelling changes as well; e.g., *actor* → *attore*, (an example of regressive assimilation). This is consistent with Banta's (1981:129) definition of *cognates*: "Cognates are pairs of words that show sound-meaning correspondences indicating their historical relationship. The correspondences need not be perfect, but they must be present in both sound and meaning."

I suggest that teachers may wish to place such lists on bulletin boards on a weekly basis. Students may add to these lists as additional words come to mind. Words that do not correspond *graphically* in both languages can be preceded by an asterisk to draw the change to the students' attention (*doctor* → **dottore*). To expand the students' knowledge of cognates, teachers may give students a keyword and ask them to complete a chart using the dictionary. For example,

Completa lo schema seguente.

Nome	*Aggettivo*	*Verbo*	*Avverbio*
decisione	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	facilmente
_____	_____	confondere	_____
_____	curioso	_____	_____

I concur with Garrison that some cognates may be introduced even in the first lesson to teach pronunciation and I suggest that students may even be urged to make short noun phrases; e.g., *un animale intelligente, un agente misterioso, un professore elegante,* etc. It would be ideal if students were able to 'contextualize' these words, at this time. Obviously, being their very first class they cannot do so. However, the activity gives students a feeling of 'power' since they think that they 'know' a lot of Italian. Teachers will find that some students, in order to be amusing, will think of improbable combinations, but these humorous, improbable combinations will stand out in the students' minds and will help them recall these endings more easily and more readily. The advantage of this type of activity is that, in some cases, it may even increase the students' English-language vocabulary.

Deceptive Cognates

Teachers should also bring to their students' attention that the appearance of some 'sound-meaning' words does not always correspond in both 'sound' *and* 'meaning.' Words such as *libreria* → *bookstore; library* → *biblioteca; sensibile* → *sensitive,* etc. do not correspond to Banta's definition of 'cognates' since they correspond in 'sound' but not in 'meaning.' These are called 'deceptive cognates'/*falsi amici.* There are two books that immediately come to mind that deal with 'deceptive cognates'/*falsi amici* with a contrastive approach: *Interferenze lessicali* (Frescura, 1984) and *Italian False Friends* (Ferguson, 1994). Frescura highlights the potential lexical problem

(*library* vs. *libreria, sensible* vs. *sensitive,* etc.) and proposes a series of pedagogical activities for each pair. Ferguson approaches each problem area from an etymological perspective, stresses the common root of both cognates, as well as their evolution and their present meaning. Both textbooks are intended for students at an intermediate/advanced level of instruction.

Negative Prefixes

Students should be made aware that some prefixes have the meaning of 'not.' One such prefix is 'in,' which is often used with learned words from Latin or French. It should be pointed out to students that such a prefix becomes *il* before words beginning with *l* (*legale* → *illegale*), *im* before words that begin with *b, m,* or *p* (*imbattibilità, immorale, imparagonabile*), *ir* in front of words beginning with *r* (*irregolare*). The prefix *dis-* is often placed in front of words beginning with a vowel (*disabitare, disaccordo*) but also in front of some consonants (*disfare*) and *s-* is used in front of other consonants, particularly in front of *c* (*scontento, scomparire, sconosciuto*). Having provided this information to the students, the teacher may assign the following exercise.

Alcuni prefissi dis-, il-, im-, in-, ir-, *e* s- *sono usati per formare il contrario di una parola. Indica nello spazio della Colonna B il contrario delle parole elencate nella Colonna A.*

Colonna A		Colonna B
1.	disaccordo	_____
2.	disonestà	_____
3.	illogico	_____
4.	immoralità	_____
5.	impossibile	_____
6.	incapacità	_____
7.	infedele	_____
8.	irregolare	_____
9.	sconosciuto	_____
10.	sfortunato	_____

Some authors suggest that the "positive" list be given first and that student be asked to turn it into a "negative" list (*contento* → *scontento*). This activity leads students into making errors since they have no way of knowing that the word is *sfortunato* and may produce *disfortunato* instead. My suggestion is that teachers provide the "negative" list first (see example, above) and ask students to provide the "positive" word, thus preventing students from making errors.

Suffixes

At an advanced stage of language learning, students should be introduced to augmentative, derogative, diminutive suffixes and to suffixes

expressing terms of endearment. The following examples are taken from Trifone and Palermo (2000:236–37):

-*acchione* (augmentative, derogative, expressing endearment): *frate* → *fratacchione; furbo* → *furbacchione; matto* → *mattacchione*

-*accio* (derogatory): *coltello* → *coltellaccio, libro* → *libraccio, voce* → *vociaccia, avaro* → *avaraccio*

-*astro* (derogative when it is a noun; less harsh if it is an adjective): *medico* → *medicastro, poeta* → *poetastro, dolce* → *dolciastro, bianco* → *biancastro, dolce* → *dolciastro, rosso* → *rossastro*

-*ello* (diminutive): *albero* → *alberello, asino* → *asinello, paese* → *paesello, rondine* → *rondinella, povero* → *poverello*. Some words do not add the suffix to the stem but rather have the 'interfixes' -*i(c)*- and -*er*-: *campo* → *camp-ic-ello, informazione* → *informanzion-c-ella, fatto* → *fatt-er-ello, fuoco* → *f(u)och-er-ello*

-*etto* (diminutive): *bacio* → *bacetto, camera* → *cameretta, casa* → *casetta, lupo* → *lupetto, basso* → *bassetto, piccolo* → *piccoletto*

-*iciattolo* (diminutive-derogative): *febbre* → *febbriciattola; libro* → *libriciattolo, mostro* → *mostriciattolo*

-*iccio* (-*igno*, -*ognolo*, -*occio*) (weaker, less forceful, when referring to adjectives of colour): *bianco* → *bianchiccio, rosso* → *rossiccio, aspro* → *asprigno, giallo* → *gialligno, amaro* → *amarognolo, azzurro* → *azzurrognolo, bello* → *belloccio, grasso* → *grassoccio*

-*icci(u)olo* (diminutive often derogative particularly with the noun): *donna* → *donnicci(u)ola, asta* → *asticci(u)ola, festa* → *festicci(u)ola, porto* → *porticciolo*

-*ino* (diminutive): *mamma* → *mammina, minestra* → *minestrina, pensiero* → *pensierino, ragazzo* → *ragazzino, bello* → *bellino, difficile* → *difficilino*. In some words the suffix is not added directly to the stem, but after the 'interfixes' -*(i)c(c)*- or -*ol*-: *bastone* → *baston-c-ino, libro* → *libri-c(c)-ino, sasso* → *sass-ol-ino, topo* → *top-ol-ino, freddo* → *fredd-ol-ino, magro* → *magr-ol-ino*. Some adverbs also have a modified form in -*ino*: *presto* → *prestino, tardi* → *tardino*

-*one* (augmentative, often derogative): *libro* → *librone, mano* → *manona, pigro* → *pigrone, ghiotto* → *ghiottone*. Feminine nouns sometimes use the masculine suffix -*one* instead of the feminine -*ona* and therefore become masculine nouns: *una febbre* → *un febbrone* (instead of *una febbrona*), *una donna* → *un donnone* (instead of *una donnona*). Some nouns may also have a cumulation of suffixes: *uomo* → *omaccio* → *omaccione, pazzo* → *pazzerello* → *pazzerellone*

-*otto* (diminutive, derogative or expressing endearment): *contadino* → *contadinotto, ragazzo* → *ragazzotto, pieno* → *pienotto, basso* → *bassotto*. The suffix may also indicate the offspring of an animal: *aquila* → *aquilotto, lepre* → *leprotto, passero* → *passerotto*. It is used more commonly to express endearment in -*acchiotto*: *lupo* → *lupacchiotto, orso* → *orsacchiotto, volpe* → *volpacchiotto, furbo* → *furbacchiotto*

-*uccio* (derogative, expressing endearment): *avvocato → avvocatuccio, casa
→ casuccia, cavallo → cavalluccio, caldo → calduccio, freddo → fredduccio.*
The suffix -*uccio* has as a variable -*uzzo: legno → legnuzzo, pietra →
pietruzza*

-*ucolo* (derogative): *donna → donnucola, maestro → maestrucolo*

-*(u)olo* (diminutive): *faccenda → faccenduola, poesia → poesiola.*

As an activity, teachers may wish to give both the suffix and a list of
suggested nouns; students are then required to form the 'new' word and
suggest a possible English translation.

Synonyms and Antonyms

Synonyms and antonyms are very useful in the acquisition of addi-
tional vocabulary. The problem that exists with the use of synonyms and
antonyms, however, is that there are really no such things as a 'perfect
synonym' or a 'perfect antonym' that can replace a given word (Mai-
guashca, 1984, 1993). When teaching synonyms and antonyms, teachers
should 'contextualize' them so that students will eventually learn to use
them correctly in future reproduction. As Marilyn Martin (1984:130)
points out:

> As we acquire our mother tongue, each encounter with the word occurs
> in a meaningful context; successive encounters reinforce our grasp of what
> makes that word special, and help narrow down its range of operations
> in the language. We slowly develop a 'feel' for what kind of linguistic and
> sociolinguistic neighborhoods it tends to inhabit. Only gradually do we
> come to appreciate the subtle distinction between a given word and its
> nearest cousin in the lexicon.

The fun element can be introduced in order to teach synonyms and
antonyms but contextualization is absolutely necessary if students are
to avoid unhappy lexical choices. A first step might be the introduction
of antonyms by using a crossword puzzle (Figure 1) but the impor-
tance of contextualization either by providing sentences or short com-
municative dialogues to bring out the meaning of the words must not
be discounted from the process of learning.

a. La guerra non ha portato che *distruzione*: ora occorre pensare di nuovo
alla *costruzione.*

b. –Per arrivare a casa tua, in cima alla collina, c'è una faticosissima *salita.*
–È vero, ma quando sei arrivato e ti giri indietro, vedi una riposante
discesa.

c. Chi sa supera un esame con *facilità*; chi non sa, invece, avrà *difficoltà.*

d. La storia mi sembra interessante, raccontami tutto dall'*inizio* alla *fine.*

Aggettivi: Al contrario!

Figure 1

Orizzontali

4. calmo
5. veloce
7. noioso
10. falso
11. distratto
13. astuto
16. basso
17. vecchio
19. bello
20: ultimo

Verticali

1. orrendo
2. maschile
3. innocente
6. povero
8. primitivo
9. leggero
12. contento
14. magro
15. difficile
18. chiuso

☐ alto
☐ aperto
☐ attento
☐ brutto
☐ colpevole
☐ evoluto
☐ facile
☐ femminile
☐ giovane
☐ grasso
☐ ingenuo
☐ interessante
☐ lento
☐ meraviglioso
☐ pesante
☐ primo
☐ ricco
☐ triste
☐ vero
☐ violento
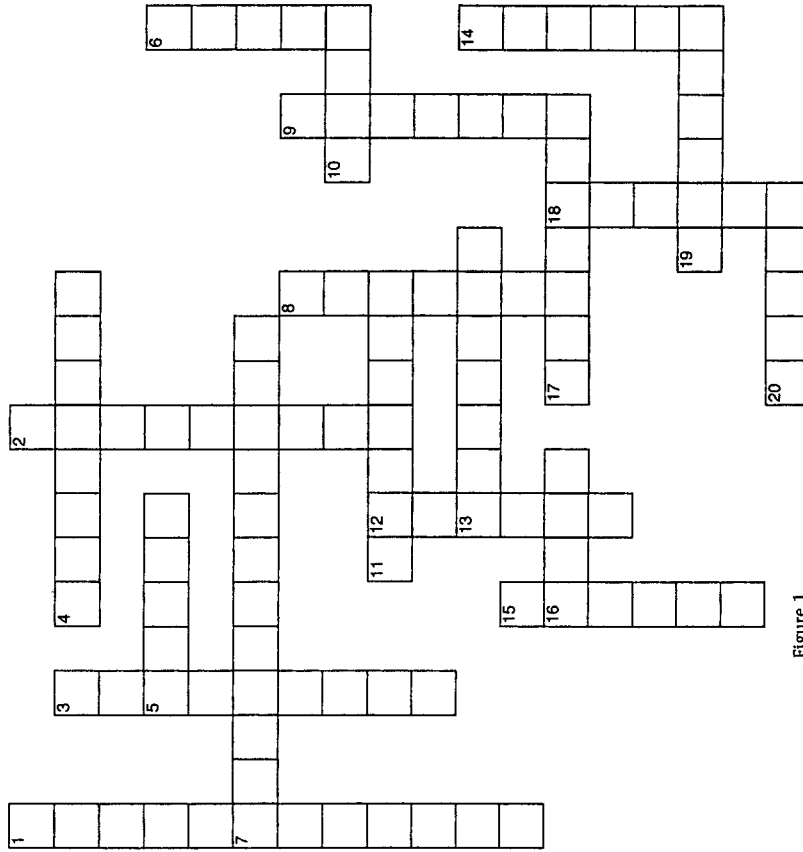
Crossword Puzzles

A great deal has been written on the use of the crossword puzzle as a means of acquiring or reviewing vocabulary (Bressan, 1970; Wolfe, 1972; Latorre and Baeza, 1975; Millington, 1977; Mollica, 1991). As Bressan (1972) points out, "A carefully graded selection of crosswords in order of complexity will contribute to the acquisition of new words and phrases as well as the consolidation of knowledge through repetition." And Latorre and Baeza (1975:51) correctly concur that

> The clues are central to the drilling objective of the crossword puzzle, since most of the information the student gets for doing the exercise is found in them. The clue is to the crossword exercise almost what the prompt is to the old pattern drill: it is the stimulus that keeps the drill going. As such, there is no place for ambiguity, deliberate or otherwise. By reading the clue, the student must know with a fair degree of accuracy which word is required, since in most cases he is being confronted with a linguistic problem within his capabilities and knowledge.

The popularity of crossword puzzles in today's society and their efficacy as a learning tool have prompted even the Italian Ministry of Education to issue a Memorandum (Prot. Nº 4571/A) to all High School Principals that allows the introduction of crossword puzzles in the Italian curriculum (Mura, 1999).

Search-A-Word Puzzles

Search-a-word puzzles are those puzzles that require the student to find words that may be written horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. To provide a motivational stimulus, this type of activity should be incorporated with a 'hidden message' that provides the student with (albeit, trivial, cultural) information about a certain event (Figure 2). Both crossword puzzles and search-a-word are very useful in language teaching, for they complement the students' learning styles: kinaesthetic, auditory or visual. The kinaesthetic learner needs to write down words to determine if they 'feel' right; the auditory learner may mouth the words silently while reading; the visual learner recognizes words by their configurations.
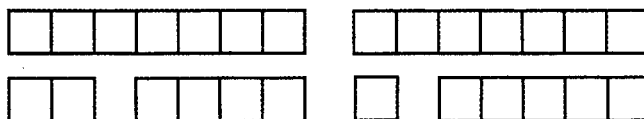
Word Games

Word games are excellent to teach or review vocabulary: anagrams, acrostics, missing letters, jumbled letters, jumbled words or sentences, hangman, rebuses, scrabble, word associations are only a few (Mollica, 1981; Nuessel and Cicogna, 1994; Mollica, Schutz, Tessar, 1996). An exhaustive list is found in Zamponi (1986), Dossena (1994), and Bartezzaghi (2001). Acrostics are useful if teachers wish to identify the title of the topic as has been done in this activity for days of the week (Figure 3).

Al contrario!

Trova nel diagramma la coppia degli opposti elencati in fondo alla pagina. Le parole possono essere ricercate sia da sinistra a destra [→] che da destra a sinistra [←], o dall'alto in basso [↓] o dal basso in alto [↑], oppure diagonalmente sia verso il basso [↘↙] che verso l'alto [↗↖], purché sempre in linea retta. Le lettere rimaste, inserite consecutivamente nel caselle, daranno il nome e cognome dell'attore che ha ricevuto l'Oscar per il migliore attore del 1999 e il titolo del miglior film straniero dello stesso amno.

O	R	O	D	O	M	I	T	L	U	B	I	E
R	R	E	L	I	C	A	F	T	A	N	O	B
E	I	D	L	E	S	O	T	U	T	S	A	N
V	I	C	I	O	O	T	N	E	T	N	O	C
O	N	I	C	F	V	O	R	R	E	N	D	O
P	N	E	R	O	F	E	G	A	N	G	O	O
N	O	I	L	L	S	I	P	V	T	S	A	S
V	C	L	I	S	O	N	C	L	O	T	T	S
M	E	R	A	V	I	G	L	I	O	S	O	A
B	N	N	A	M	H	E	O	A	L	C	P	R
E	T	N	A	O	C	N	A	I	B	E	B	G
E	E	G	E	L	C	U	L	P	R	I	M	O
T	R	I	S	T	E	O	T	T	U	R	B	L
O	S	S	A	B	V	A	O	S	U	I	H	C

□ alto □ basso □ ingenuo □ astuto

□ aperto □ chiuso □ interessante □ noioso

□ attento □ distratto □ meraviglioso □ orrendo

□ brutto □ bello □ primo □ ultimo

□ colpevole □ innocente □ ricco □ povero

□ facile □ difficile □ triste □ contento

□ giovane □ vecchio □ vero □ falso

□ grasso □ magro

Figure 2
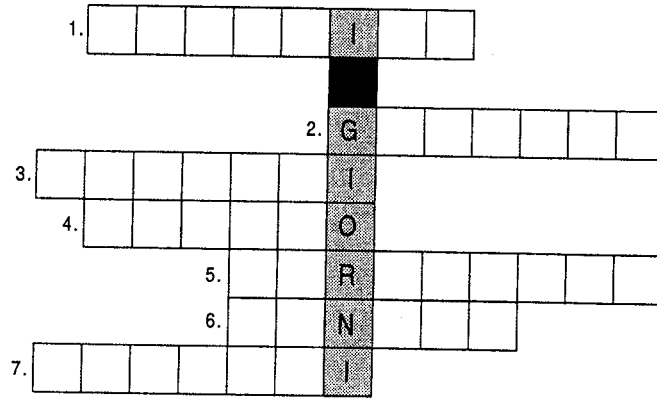
I giorni

A. *Inserisci i nomi dei giorni della settimana nelle caselle.*

☐ lunedì
☐ martedì
☐ mercoledì
☐ giovedì

☐ venerdì
☐ sabato
☐ domenica

B. *Completa lo schema seguente:*

	Ieri era...	Oggi è...	Domani sarà...
	←	↓	→
1.	_____	martedì	_____
2.	venerdì	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	sabato
4.	lunedì	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____	martedì
6.	giovedì	_____	_____
7.	_____	mercoledì	_____

Figure 3

Humour — where available — could also be added to enhance the theme.

> La maestra ha assegnato il seguente tema:
> *"Raccontate una storia a vostro piacimento citando però tutti i giorni della set-*
> *timana."*
> Ecco lo svolgimento di Pierino:
> *"Domenica mio papà è andato a caccia. Ha preso una grossa lepre, così grossa*
> *che ne abbiamo mangiato lunedì, martedì, mercoledì, giovedì, venerdì. E ne è*
> *avanzata anche per sabato."*

Topical Vocabulary

I firmly believe that students will be able to recall vocabulary more easily if it presented with a thematic approach (Figure 4). In this activity on 'abbigliamento,' students are asked to insert (i.e., write) the word in the suitable squares. Copying is very important in language learning since the learner may be faced with a new type of alphabet other than Roman or may have been accustomed to writing from right to left. The activity, once completed, will yield the Italian proverb closely associated with articles of clothing: *l'abito non fa il monaco.* Teachers should devise additional motivational and communicative activities in order to exploit the vocabulary more fully and present it in a variety of interesting ways. Unfortunately, even when a thematic approach is used, most textbooks tend to teach single lexical items in isolation. A suitable activity after teaching the parts of the body (*testa, capelli, occhi, naso,* etc.) would be to introduce vocabulary words closely related to that word (Maiguashca, Frescura, Karumanchiri, Vizmuller, 1993):

> *capelli*: bianchi, biondi, castani, grigi, neri, rossi, corti, lisci, ondulati, ricci
> *occhi*: azzurri, castani, chiari, grigi, neri, scuri, verdi
> *naso*: aquilino, all'insù, grande, lungo, piccolo.

At an intermediate or advanced level, a natural follow-up activity would be a series of idioms associated with that keyword; e.g.,

> *testa*:
> essere una bella testa
> camminare in testa
> testa di legno
> testa o croce
> a testa alta
> perdere la testa per qualcuno
> avere la testa fra le nuvole,
> etc.

Abbigliamento

Inserisci nelle caselle il nome degli abbigliamenti. Le lettere inserite nelle caselle annerite daranno un proverbio.

☐ *i* calzini

☐ *i* pantaloni

☐ *il* maglione

☐ *la* tuta

☐ *un* impermeabile

☐ *il* pigiama

☐ *i* pantaloncini

☐ stivali

☐ *la* sciarpa

☐ *la* camicia

☐ *le* pantofole

☐ *i* guanti

☐ *il* cappello

☐ *il* berretto

☐ *la* biancheria intima

☐ *la* gonna

☐ *le* scarpe

☐ *i* sandali

☐ *la* cravatta

Figure 4

Denotation vs. Connotation in Vocabulary Acquisition

Our ability to communicate effectively is dependent upon our skill in using language. However, it is important to teach not only communication but also 'cultural' meaning of words. Language and culture are inseparable. To teach one means to teach the other. Authors of second-language textbooks must not only identify the denotation of words, but also, where necessary, the connotations of those words and idioms. Where words seem to correspond lexically in their denotation, they may well diverge considerably in their connotation or the emotional association they arouse. While *bread* and *pane* may correspond lexically in their denotation, they certainly do not correspond in their connotation. *Bread* is often found in a plasticized wrapping and is soft. The Italian *pane* brings markedly different associations to mind. As the College Entrance Examination Board (1986:22) stressed,

> Both at home and abroad, the linguistic skills that students need to communicate with speakers of other languages must be accompanied by knowledge about the culture. For example, students need to know not only words to use in greetings but also how to vary greetings according to the time of day, the social context, the age of the individual, and so forth, as well as what gestures to use, such as shaking hands or bowing.

It is a widely-accepted notion, then, that language skills must be taught integrally with cultural knowledge (Balboni, 1999).

Visual Vocabulary

There exists on the market a plethora of materials in order to teach vocabulary using the visual element. As Brown and Mollica pointed out (1990:1),

> Visuals have been used as an aid to language and the transmission of information since pre-historic times. From the paintings and drawings found on the walls of the cave-dwellers, through Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograms to modern visual extravaganzas, man has consistently made visual representation of reality.... This is not at all surprising given the fact that the sight is the strongest of the five senses. Most of the information we have about the world derives from the condition of seeing.

The visual element in language teaching has been strongly advocated by the Czech writer and humanist Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670) in his *Orbis sensualium pictus* [*The Tangible World Illustrated*]. Comenius firmly believed that words that can be designated by images should be shown to the students whether they were learning their first or a second language for nothing could be understood unless it was first felt by the senses. For Comenius the perception of things had to come before the teaching of the words used to name them. Even a cursory glance in today's bookstores

will show a variety of illustrated word books aimed at teaching vocabulary to young learners.

There are a number of other sound reasons why we concur with Comenius' theory. The illustrations

a) allow students to establish direct association between word and image,
b) teach vocabulary without resorting to definition, description or translation,
c) are great for the visual learner.

Illustrations are an important aid in language acquisition. Teachers often make extensive use of visual images in the classroom for illustrating meaning. Research clearly shows that there is little doubt that objects and pictures can facilitate memory. In language learning this is a distinct advantage: our memory for visual images is extremely reliable and it is easy to conjure up a mental image of a concrete item. As Clifford T. Morgan and Richard A. King (1966:197) suggest: "Most, if not all, people experience images and images often help in thinking. Some individuals have such vivid imagery that they can recall things almost perfectly; this is called eidetic imagery."

Mollica (1981) stresses that psycholinguists, too, often point out that the use of visual imagery is crucial to recall mechanisms and to the development of eidetic memory. All this, of course, is beneficial to language learning. There should be a *caveat*, however. The name of the object or thing may correspond lexically in its denotation with the target language but it will not correspond 'visually' with the object in the target language. On the surface the object appears to be the same, but there are often minor cultural differences. A good example to illustrate this discussion is the word for *coffee pot*. The North American *coffee pot*, while it corresponds *lexically* with the Italian *caffettiera*, is distinctly different *visually*.

The Fun Element in Vocabulary Acquisition

There is a vast literature that emphasizes that games are generally very useful in acquiring new vocabulary or expanding the existing one. Vocabulary is a topic that lends itself very well to the games approach (Mollica, 1981; Zamponi, 1986; Battipede, 1991; Gorini, 1991; Dossena, 1994; Nuessel and Cicogna, 1994; Di Stefano, 1997; Gennari, 1997; Tanzini, 2001; Bartezzaghi, 2001). According to Wallace (1982), language games have become more widely used recently, probably for two main reasons:

a) an increasing emphasis on the importance of motivation, and of the appropriate kind of positive affective atmosphere in the classroom,
b) an increasing emphasis on the importance of 'real' communication. If a game is working properly, it very often supplies a genuine desire to communicate in the target language, even within the artificial confines of the classroom.

Danesi and Mollica (1994:331–32) in 'revisiting' the importance of games in the language classroom, point out that:

> These techniques do not constitute a method or an educational para-digm. They are enjoyable activities that can be used together with other kinds of practice devices for reinforcement, review, thinking, control, and communication in the classroom. All these techniques really aim to do is to achieve the same kind of exercise and practice goals that the more traditional drills and activities do. But, they inject so much fun into the process that they end up invariably fostering a positive attitude in teacher and student alike to the learning tasks at hand. And this is the primary condition for learning to occur.

The following are some well-known popular and widely-used games/strategies in teaching/reviewing/learning vocabulary at various levels of language learning.

Kim's Game

Using the overhead projector, the teacher shows several illustrated items on a transparency for sixty seconds or any other predetermined time. The object of this memory game is to recall as many items as possible. At the intermediate or advanced stage of language learning, teachers may ask students to make a sentence using the word recalled.

I pack my suitcase . . .

This is essentially a memory game focusing on repetition and recall. The student is asked to identify a destination and an item: *I am leaving for . . . and I am packing my suitcase. In it I put. . . .* Each student must repeat the item identified and add one more. Each subsequent student repeats the whole list of items, in sequential order, and adds one more to the list. The activity works well with *Articles of Clothing* but it can and should be changed to suit other topics such as:

a) I went to the market and I bought . . . (list of *fruit and vegetables*)
b) I went for a trip around the world and I travelled in/by . . . (followed by various means of *transportation*)
c) I went to visit my uncle's farm and I saw . . . (list of *farm animals*)
d) Last week, my family took a trip to the zoo and we saw . . . (list of animals found *at the zoo*)
e) I enjoy playing/watching . . . (list of various *sports*)
f) I entered the kitchen and I saw . . . (list of items found *in the kitchen*)
g) etc.

This game is useful for vocabulary learning using a thematic approach.

Whisper Game

Students are asked to form a circle. The first student may be given a list of items (similar to the *I pack my suitcase . . .*) and be asked to repeat

it to the next student who repeats it to the next until the list comes full circle to its point of origin. It is interesting to compare whether the items are given in the correct original order and how many items are being recalled and how many have been 'lost' in the transfer of information. The same principle may be used by telling the students four of five sentences describing an event.

Twenty Questions

The game focuses on questions/answers. One player chooses an item. The group has twenty questions in which to identify the mystery object or item. Only questions that can be answered by *yes* or *no* are permitted. The student who correctly identifies the object replaces the player as the one who chooses the next object or scores a point for his/her team.

The Intruder

Some basic second-language textbooks include a series of words from which the intruder (i.e., the word that does not belong in the group) should be sought out and identified. The same activity can be done using visual stimuli. Teachers may wish to present their students with illustrations of *peas, a carrot, a banana,* and *a cob of corn.* The intruder can be *the banana* because it is a fruit. An equally-acceptable answer is *the carrot;* the explanation being that it is the only one without 'skin.' The goal of this activity is not necessarily a matter of one correct response, but how logical is the explanation. Observation has shown that in the attempt to solve the problem and in the eagerness to provide suitable explanations, students rapidly forget that they are using another language. In other words, the focus has shifted from language form to language use, since in the attempt to reach a solution, learners formulate their verbalization to the solution in the target language. This psycholinguistic process is, in effect, conducive to 'thinking' in the target language.

Concentration

In this game, teachers cut out the pictures and paste them up on equalized rectangular coloured art-paper. Six or more pairs are needed, mixed and placed face down. Students work in groups of two or three. The first player turns up a card, identifies the illustration and then turns up a second card. If the two cards match, the student collects them and continues as long as he/she picks up matching pairs for which he/she can give the correct answer. If the student does not find a matching pair, he/she returns the cards, face down, to the original positions and loses his/her turn. It is then the next player's turn to find a pair. The winning student is the one who has collected the most pairs.

Charades

In this game, students are asked to mime the meaning of a word. The opposing team or student must guess the word.

I am thinking of . . .

In this game, the teacher or a student asks the class to identify a vocabulary item he/she is thinking about. The only information given is one identifying characteristic of the item. For students in the pre-reading stage, this might be a colour of the object. For those who have learned to spell, it might be the first letter of the name of the object. The students have a limited number of chances to guess correctly.

Labelling

Teachers provide an illustration and students are asked to label the various items on it. The student or group of students who completes labelling the illustration first is declared the winner. It is useful to have these illustrations on a large laminated poster and have students use a water-soluble marker or grease pencil. The words then may then be wiped off and the laminated poster can be used again in the future.

Concluding Remarks

Teachers should involve students in a variety of motivational and creative activities. The success in teaching/learning vocabulary depends not only on how lexical items are presented but also on how they are drilled. It also depends on students' learning styles. Both will directly affect and help retention.*

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