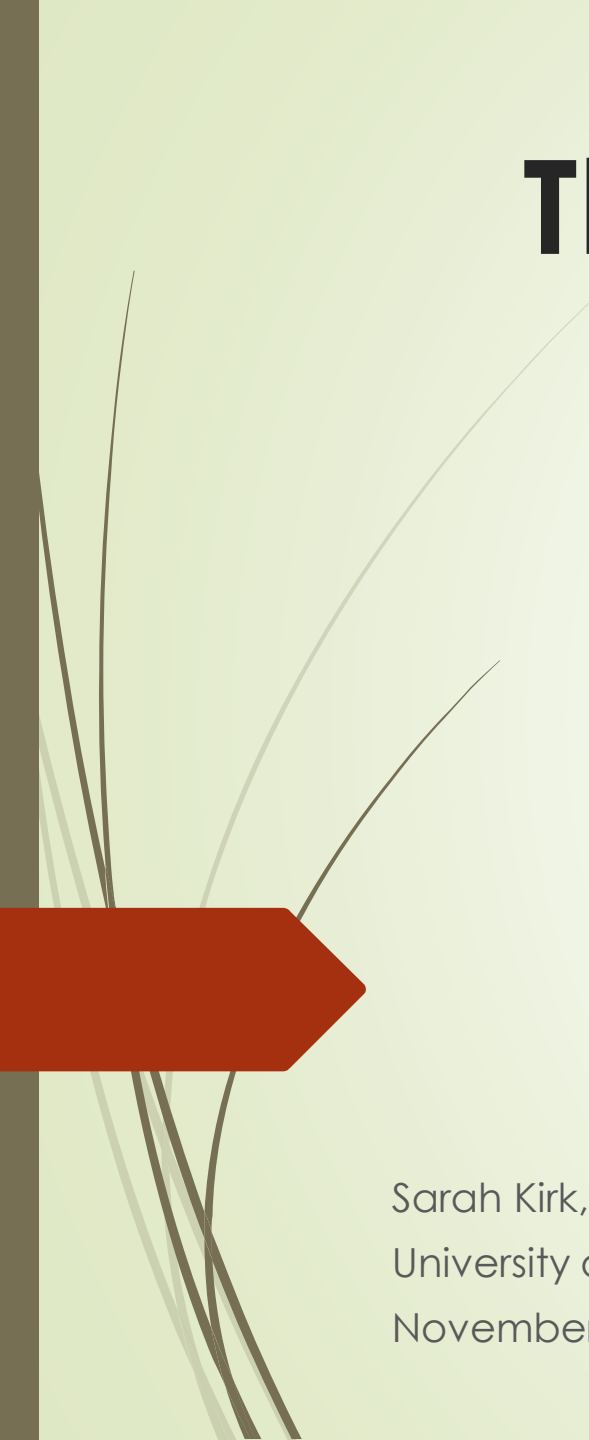# The Importance of Teaching Word Knowledge

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Current Research and Proven Learning Activities

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November 27, 2020

"…readers need to continuously update their own knowledge by locating relevant sources for their own scholarship and teaching…" (ix).

Christine Pearson Casanave (2017)

Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction, 2nd edition
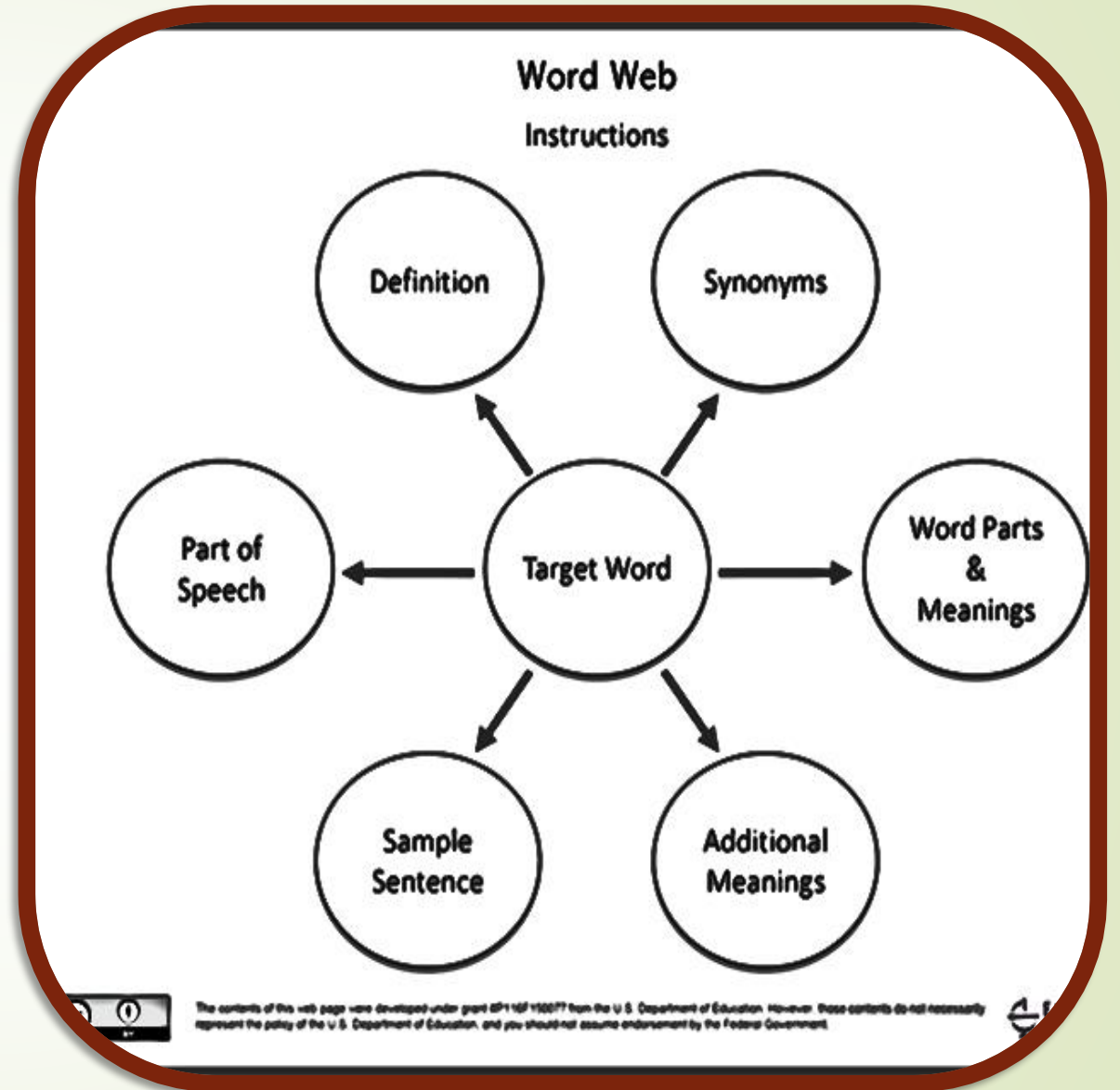
How much instructional time do you spend on vocabulary and word knowledge?

…why?
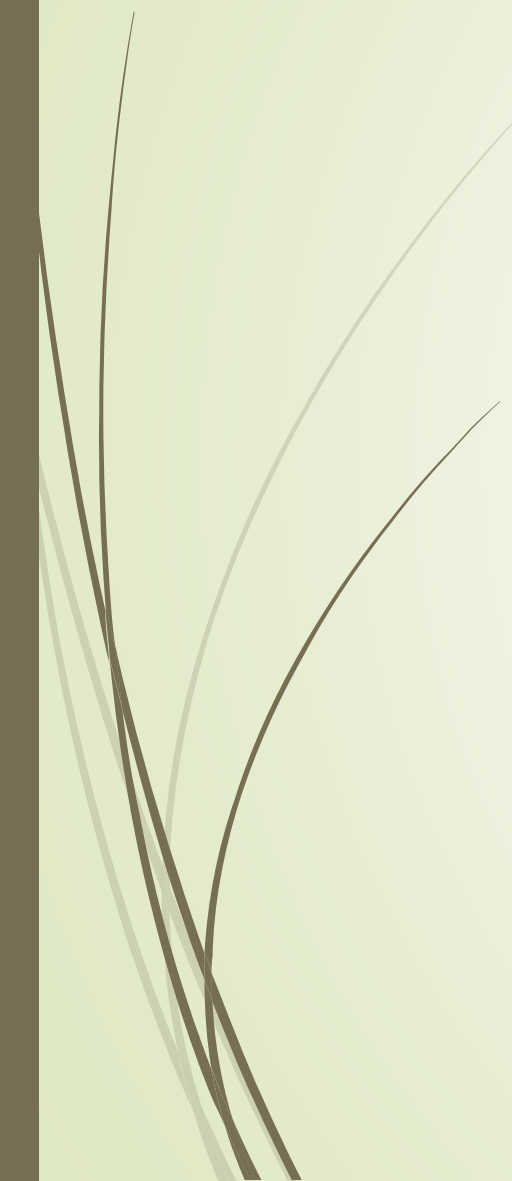
Note:

Current U.S. Language Arts classrooms spend only 5-10% of instructional time on vocabulary learning.

Overview

- Current Research
- Vocabulary Myths
- "Word Consciousness"
- Vocabulary-learning Activities
- Questions and Discussion

Current Research

Review: Instructed Second Language Vocabulary Learning

- **Conclusion**
  - A large vocabulary is necessary to function in English…
    - 8000-9000 word families for reading
    - 5000-7000 families for oral discourse
    - And a number of word knowledge aspects need to be learned about each lexical item.
  - "This is a substantial learning challenge…."

- **Facilitation of Learning Requires…**
  - 4 vocabulary **learning partners** (students, teachers, materials writers, researchers) need to contribute to the learning process.
  - Vocabulary learning programs need to include explicit, intentional learning component and a component based around **maximizing exposure** and incidental learning.
  - **Increase amount of engagement** learners have with lexical items.
  - Acknowledge the **incremental nature** of vocabulary learning and design programs around this principle.

Current Research

A Research Synthesis: A Review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction

Edited by Shari Butler, Kelsi Urrutia, Anneta Buenger, Nina Gonzalez, Marla Hunt, and Corinne Eisenhart

National Reading Technical Assistance Center (2010)

https://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/support/rmcfinal1.pdf

- **Message**
  - "Teaching vocabulary will not guarantee success in reading, just as learning to read words will not guarantee success in reading.
  - However, lacking either adequate word identification skills or adequate vocabulary will ensure failure" (Biemiller, 2005).

8 Findings about Vocabulary Instruction
Vocabulary for Demanding Texts

- 1. Provide direct instruction of vocabulary words for a specific text.

- 2. Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important.

- 3. Choose target words that are useful for learners in many contexts.

- 4. Tasks should be restructured as necessary.

- 5. Active engagement needs to go beyond definitional knowledge.

- 6. Computer technology can be used effectively.

- 7. Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning.

- 8. Dependence on a single vocabulary instruction method will not result in optimal learning.

Keith S. Folse (2004) prefaces his book that "since the mid-1990s there has been a mini-explosion of second language research studies on vocabulary" (v).

The biggest 'myth' is that *"vocabulary is not a big deal."*

Vocabulary Myth #1

In learning another language, vocabulary is
not as important as grammar as other areas.

- **What the Research Says…**
  - Second language learners observe _first_ in their new language that they need vocabulary knowledge to function in well in the new language.
- **What You Can Do…**
  - Understand how much of your students' ability to understand you is impacted by vocabulary issues.
    - **Slow down.** Use simple vocabulary. Avoid phrasal verbs. Avoid idioms. Avoid slang.
  - Become aware of the problem of vocabulary for our students.
  - Choose materials that emphasize vocabulary.
  - Include vocabulary on your quizzes and tests.

Vocabulary Myth #2
Using word lists to learn second language vocabulary is unproductive.

- **What the Research Says…**
  - Second language learners need help tackling the tremendous task of learning enough vocabulary to be able to communicate in their new language.
  - There is little evidence that <u>learning words from lists is an ineffective</u> way to learn vocabulary.
  - Advanced learners benefit from learning vocabulary in context, while beginning learners benefit most from words presented in lists of **translation pairs.**

- **What You Can Do…**
  - Don't hesitate to **use vocabulary lists.**
    - Have students learn different things about a word: lists with a translation, synonym, simple definition as first steps.
  - **Don't rely only on word lists.** Never rely on just one method or approach.

Vocabulary Myth #3
Presenting new vocabulary in semantic sets facilitates learning.

- **What the Research Says…**
  - A semantic set (i.e. "Apples, bananas, pears, and oranges are fruit.") actually **hinders** and **impedes** learning.
  - A better way to organize material is by **thematic sets** (i.e. eating out with friends, cooking something, telling a lie). Students learn words faster and better when taught words that can be used *together*.
- **What You Can Do…**
  - Do not present words initially in semantic sets.
  - Use thematic presentations of new words when possible.
  - Teach the most frequent words first; then cover other items within that semantic set.

Vocabulary Myth #4
The use of translations to learn vocabulary should be discouraged.

- **What the Research Says…**
  - Students translate vocabulary in their heads or in their notebooks. Doing this is not intrusive. It actually aids the learners in remembering these vocabulary items.
  - A single translation does not provide full knowledge of a word, but it does not need to.
  - A word can have several meanings, but learning one meaning at a time works. There is no reason to teach a learner all meanings of a word at once.

- **What You Can Do…**
  - Do not stop a student who is jotting down a translation of a new English word.
  - Let a more knowledgeable student help another who speaks the same language.
  - Learn what you can about your students' native language.

Vocabulary Myth #5

Guessing words from context is an excellent strategy for learning L2 vocabulary.

- **What the Research Says…**
  - Guessing vocabulary from context is how native speakers frequently learn the meaning of L1 words. **L2 learners do not have the multiple exposures** to words over time and in a variety of contexts as L1 learners.
  - Learning vocabulary meanings from context does not foster retention of meanings.
  - L2 words are more successfully learned when presented with their translations.
- **What You Can Do…**
  - Teach the use of context clues as a good *reading* strategy, but recognize that learners cannot rely on this strategy for vocabulary growth.
  - Exercises that ask students to guess word meanings from context should be done in class so that the teacher can give immediate feedback.

WORD KNOWLEDGE

A Vocabulary Teacher's Handbook

Cheryl Boyd Zimmerman (2009)

Teachers need to

"…approach [learning a word] as a process rather than a single act of memorization" (2).

OXFO

"Word Consciousness"

What educated English Speakers know…

- about 50,000 words
- and can use 90%! (1)

Examples of "Word Knowledge"

1. *The hospital wouldn't admit an <u>invalid</u> with an <u>invalid</u> insurance card.*
2. *Since there is no time for the <u>present</u>, he thought it was time to <u>present</u> the <u>present</u>.*

Definitions and Understanding…

- Word consciousness is an alertness to words…" (3).

  - Language is human

    - …not always consistent

    - …and often confusing!

We need to "acknowledge the extensiveness of what it means to know a word….understanding the many layers of word knowledge" (5).

Word Knowledge

- Types and features of word knowledge "are likened to layers, which are added incrementally, in no particular order".

- The learner needs to learn from each word encounter and "gradually add layer after layer of knowledge until a word is understood and can be used with ease" (5).

Layers	Activities
Meaning	
Collocations	
Grammatical Features	
Word Parts	
Register/Appropriate Forms	

Vocabulary Activity: Meaning
Learning Words That Belong Together

- My favorite vocabulary activity about "meaning" is to have students determine 2 words from a class list that "belong together."

- **Purpose:** a "review" activity prior to testing students.

- The activity requires students to move, to talk to each other, and to think critically and creatively about target words.
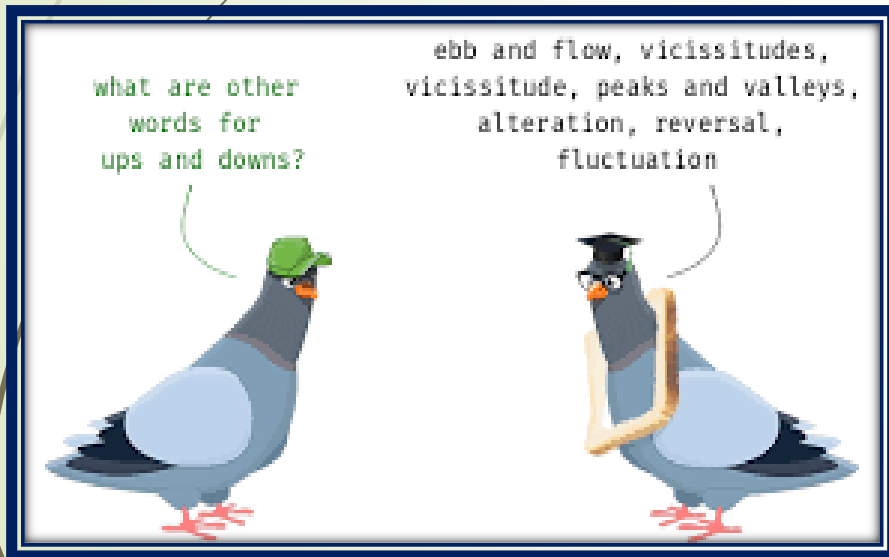
- **Procedure**
  - **1.** Give each student a notecard with ONE target word written on it from a known list of target words.
  - **2.** Students must find their "partner word" by walking around the classroom and asking classmates' for their target word and discussing if they are "pairs."
  - **3.** When a "pair" is determined by the students, they come to the front of the class and explain how their 2 words belong together.
  - **4.** The class votes to approve or disapprove the pairing.
  - **5.** The activity continues until every student has found their "match."

Vocabulary Activity: Collocation
Metaphorical "Ups" and "Downs"

Goal: to have learners identify collocations based on the metaphorical patterns of *up* and *down*.
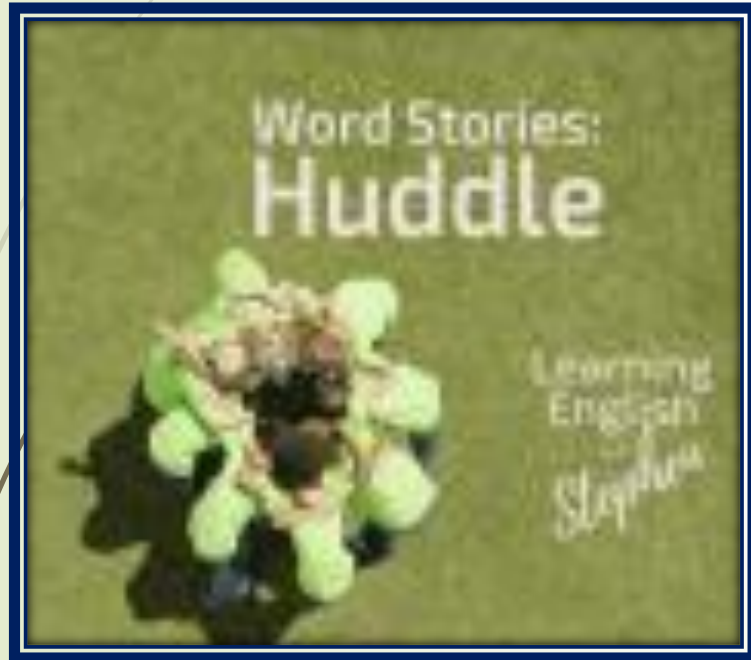

Procedure

- **1.** Explain that in English, things are positive or good often collocate with words that express the idea of **UP** (e.g. *Things are looking up.*). Things that are negative or bad often collocate with words that express the idea of **DOWN** (e.g. *Things are at an all-time low.*)

- **2.** Have students brainstorm examples. It might help to prompt them with categories, such as status, morality, emotions. Lead a class discussion about the examples.

- **3.** For **in-class activity**, have students work in pairs to come up (!) with one positive and one negative use of UP and DOWN. Write these on the board and discuss.

- **4.** As a **homework** assignment, have students look for further examples in newspapers, magazines, online sources and conversation. Then have them share their findings with the class.

Vocabulary Activity: Grammatical Features
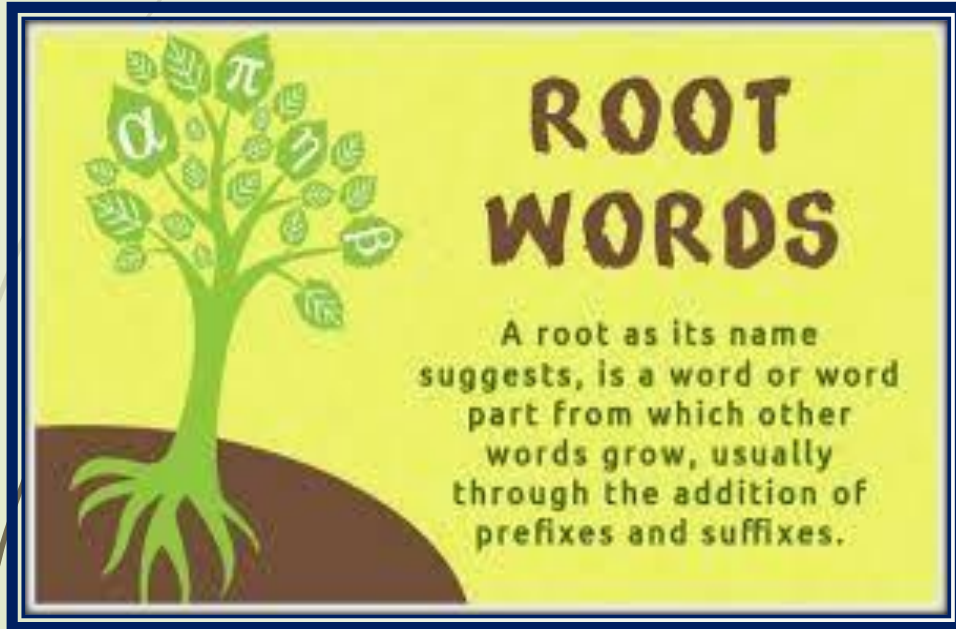## *A Picture Tells a Story*

- **Procedure**
  - 1. On the board, show a four-column chart labelled **Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs**, one per column.
  - 2. Students then look at a picture that could inspire an interesting story.
  - 3. In pairs, have students brainstorm a word that would be useful to describe the picture.
  - 4. As a class, select 3-5 words from that list to use.
  - 5. Write each word in the appropriate column of the chart, according to its part of speech.
  - 6. In pairs, students create a story about the picture. REQUIREMENT: One of the words on the class list must be used, and all 4 columns of the Word Chart must be used.

Vocabulary Activity: Word Parts
Word Surgery (Dividing Words into Parts)

ROOT WORDS

A root as its name suggests, is a word or word part from which other words grow, usually through the addition of prefixes and suffixes.

- **Procedure**
  - 1. Review information about prefixing, suffixing, and compounding.
  - 2. Pair students and give each pair 2-3 words from the list of target words to perform "Word Surgery."
  - 3. Student pairs divide each word into its meaningful parts. Next, they identify the parts as roots, prefixes, or suffixes. (Example: im – poss – ible.)
  - 4. Students share answers and clarify the meanings of the word parts.

  Follow-up: For advanced students, have pairs exchange their words and then write a few sentences using the new words.

Vocabulary Activity: Register and Other Language Variation
Formal Counterparts

Be aware of register differences between languages.

Formal and informal Words

Informal		Formal
sorry	⟶	apologize
go up	⟶	increase
go down	⟶	decrease
find out	⟶	discover
show	⟶	illustrate
deal with	⟶	handle
free	⟶	release
think about	⟶	consider
look at	⟶	examine

Daily English Learning

- **Procedure**
  - 1. Review information about informal / colloquial and formal language.
  - 2. List current target words on the board, placing them into the appropriate category.
  - 3. Pronounce words and discuss meanings.
  - 4. In pairs, students identify counterparts for each word. (e. g. "okay" vs "fine, acceptable.")
  - 5. Class discusses students' work. Use dictionaries if needed.

Final Notes

As a teacher

reflect,

and ask questions about words

- Develop your **own fascination** about words and let your students see your enthusiasm.
- **Share stories** about how word learning has been powerful for you.
- Show your students that you take **their learning seriously**.
- **Listen** to your students and their attempts to learn new words.
- **Encourage** your students to take risks and respect their errors and questions.

Questions