

Vocabulary Building for Life: A Suggested Approach

Harry Sewlall



Madam & Eve, *The Star*, October 18, 2021, p. 6.

Preamble

It is a truism that words are the building blocks of a language and that as a literate community we continue to extend our repertoire of words, either incidentally or conscientiously, to make sense of an expanding linguistic universe. Some people take their love for words well beyond their school years, playing Scrabble or filling in crossword puzzles as a leisure activity. One such person I know of is a former primary school pupil of mine who once told me he gets his daily “fix” from the cryptic crossword, for which I simply lack the gift, time and patience. Because he remembers my effort to extend the vocabulary of my pupils when he was in my class, today he rewards me by enlisting me as a subscriber to Anu Garg’s online Word-a-Day. I don’t have the heart to tell him that some of the words on this website are so outlandish that I will never use them in my lifetime. This former pupil of mine exemplifies the type of adult who continues to extend his vocabulary conscientiously. That we as teachers need to inculcate a love for words, their texture, meaning, usage and pronunciation on a continual basis is a given.

A Suggested Approach: The Incidental Word Column

Before I became full professor of English (and all that jazz!), fate had decreed that I serve as a junior primary teacher, a senior primary teacher, a high school teacher of English and finally an inspector of English for schools. This brief account of my professional life is meant to convey my invaluable experience of being present at the child’s breakthrough to literacy while unlocking his or her world of the 3 R’s: reading, ’riting and ’rithmetic. And all this is accomplished primarily through the spoken and written word. Hence the need to continue extending a learner’s vocabulary, and using what I refer to as the Incidental Word column to achieve this.

In essence, I drew a margin or column of about 40 cm on the extreme left hand side of the chalkboard, the traditional teaching aid in the classroom since time immemorial (apart from the ferule which old

school masters used to beat their pupils!). It was headed “Incidental Words” followed by “PDNE” (Please Do Not Erase). Visiting subject teachers were encouraged to jot down words that would crop up during a lesson. These words would remain in the incidental word column until it was full, by which time the learners would have recorded some of the words in their notebooks.

As the child progressed through the different grades (or standards as we called them), I realised that one column was not enough so I had another drawn on the extreme right hand side of the chalkboard. I took this practice from my primary school teaching days to my secondary school classes.

High school teaching is not always subject based, whereby the specialist subject teacher has a classroom to himself or herself and the students are expected to visit the teacher for their lessons. At some high schools the subject teacher has to move from class to class to deliver a lesson. No longer having the monopoly over a chalkboard, I modified my approach. The incidental word column now transferred from the chalkboard to the students’ counter books. They used to draw a rectangular column, about the size of a library index card, on the top right hand side of their note books, where they would record the key terms of an English lesson.

Conclusion

As the *Madam & Eve* cartoon at the beginning of this article suggests, our linguistic world is forever expanding. That the newspaper cartoon is itself an excellent source for a vocabulary lesson on the importance of correct pronunciation (as is the case with the word “risible”), is a subject for another day. Suffice to say, we cannot escape words and we are never too old to learn new ones. Recently I had to look up the word “cisgender”. From the context in which it appeared, I knew it would not be in my old *Concise Oxford*, so I visited UG – University of Google! If we are to make sense of our contemporary world of sexual identities, “cisgender” is a word we cannot escape.

Harry Sewlall

Extraordinary Professor: North-West University

February 2022