

Vocabulary Improvement for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing with *Meet the Words*

Kim Brecklein
Tulsa Community College

Abstract

This article comes from a poster presentation of a World Wide Web based vocabulary course developed for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Web courses present special challenges and well as unique opportunities for learners who are deaf or hard of hearing. This poster presentation focuses on the ways in which one instructor worked through many of the relevant issues.

Vocabulary Improvement for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing with *Meet the Words*

The Resource Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (RCDHH) at Tulsa Community College offers a slate of classroom based courses to assist our students to enhance basic skills. However, we found that a number of our students wanted additional work in vocabulary building even after they had completed RCDHH's three levels of reading and vocabulary classes. In addition, our colleagues in other institutions in Oklahoma reported a similar student demand for vocabulary enrichment. Unfortunately, although most of the institutions, including our own, offer vocabulary courses, many of the courses developed for hearing students do not address the primary concerns of our students. Consequently, we decided to explore the possibility of developing an on-line vocabulary course for these students.

Once RCDHH determined a need for such a class, it fell to me to develop it. However, I did not feel that a course that would simply present and test over a long list of vocabulary words was either necessary or likely to be effective. Instead, I decided to spend some time examining what students have told us about their needs regarding vocabulary development. I found that our students' vocabulary needs tend to fall into three categories. First, they need ways to unlock word meanings without continually resorting to dictionaries (which were not always particularly helpful). Next, they need strategies for finding variations on root words; in other words, they do not always realize that words such as "recognize" and "unrecognizable" are related. Finally, they need a means to determine which form of a word to use in their own writing; in other words, should they use "Jan was sympathy," or "Jan was sympathetic"?

Course Design

The course I came up with, Vocabulary Improvement for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, was developed to meet these three needs on a level that fills the gaps between vocabulary studies created for use with basal reading texts and those intended for traditional college level vocabulary courses. The vocabulary itself was selected with the needs of the adult learner who is deaf or hard of hearing as the foremost consideration with a focus on expanding vocabulary through building an understanding of

how common affixes alter meaning and usage. The course focuses on word parts and how they work together to form new words and to change the meanings and functions of familiar words.

Vocabulary Improvement consists of an introductory unit and twelve vocabulary units. The introductory unit sets forth quick and simple principles (more properly considered “rules of thumb” rather than a comprehensive grammar) for determining a word’s “work” in a sentence. These principles are reviewed and constantly reinforced in the vocabulary units. Each unit except the introductory unit has twelve words divided between two PowerPoint presentations. The presentations are divided in order to allow students to plan their learning sessions more effectively and to avoid stretching the attention span beyond a comfortable limit.

Although the course was originally conceived and developed as an on-line course, I realize that some instructors may prefer to use the curriculum in other ways. As a result, RCDHH decided to make the course materials available on a CD-ROM as well as on-line.

In the initial version, the course was offered by Tulsa Community College using *Learning Space* as the course interface. Subsequently, the College switched to *Blackboard* for most Internet courses, and Vocabulary Improvement was revised for this product. I have not taught the course since this switch was made, but I anticipate that it will run even more smoothly with Blackboard than it did earlier. *Blackboard* allows students to self-enroll, but those who miss the deadline for payment of tuition and fees are removed from the system. All course materials and assessments are available on-line. A face-to-face orientation is always desirable but not vital, and I do not schedule one unless individual students request it. Assessments are designed to be “open book” to avoid the necessity of on-site testing or proctoring. Some assessments include immediate remedial feedback for incorrect answers. Assessments are graded automatically by *Blackboard*, and the results are available to individual students on-line.

The CD-ROM version can easily be used in either a classroom or a lab. I have used it in both situations myself and found it to work very smoothly. The student computers in the RCDHH lab all have PowerPoint and Word installed, but a PowerPoint Viewer and a Microsoft Word Viewer

are available to allow users who do not have the full versions of these programs to use the course materials. A printer should be available to students or lab personnel should print the assessments, lesson outlines, and handouts ahead of time to distribute to students. Assessments for the CD-ROM version of the course are paper and pencil based and must be graded by hand. Answer keys are on the CD-ROM, so the teacher or lab attendant should copy the course to the lab computer’s hard-drive minus the answer keys. The remedial feedback is not available for the paper and pencil version of the assessments. Lessons are self-contained and may be used out of sequence.

All of the lessons are formatted in a similar way, so once a student learns the format, he or she should be able work independently. For each lesson, a student first works through the two PowerPoint presentations then proceeds to the assignments. At the beginning of a lesson, students are reminded to print or locate their Practice Sheet. The purpose of the Practice Sheet is to engage the learner as he or she proceeds through the lesson. Next, a major word part is introduced and defined and the first vocabulary word using the word part is introduced. The word is then analyzed by breaking it down into its parts and these parts are identified and defined. The purpose of the analysis is to model and reinforce effective word attack strategies. In addition, learners are exposed to incidental learning of word parts which are used and defined but not featured in the lesson.

After word analysis, the learner is invited to choose one of three possible “estimates” for the word’s meaning, using the analysis as the basis for the estimate. Students record their answers on their Practice Sheets. By making an “estimate” of the word’s meaning, students engage with the analysis just presented to them and gain experience in using known morphemes to arrive at word meaning. Once the student has recorded his or her estimate on the Practice Sheet, the word’s actual definition(s) and part(s) of speech are presented, and the student can compare these with the recorded estimate.

Finally, a sentence example for each definition and/or part of speech is presented. The sentence is shown using the word and then shown again using a synonym or short definition in the place of the word so students can be sure they un-

derstand the sentence. At the end of the presentation, students check the answers they recorded on their Practice Sheets.

After completing the presentations, the students work through a number of assignments. In the on-line version of the course, all the assignments are electronically graded and many have immediate feedback for responses. Each lesson includes a "Working with Definitions" assignment, in which students match words with their definitions and parts of speech. This exercise is simply to assist students with focusing on, understanding and remembering the definitions and parts of speech.

In the next two assignments, students begin to work with the words in sentences. In the "Working with Sentences" and "More Work with Sentences," students select the proper word to complete a sentence. In "Working with Sentences," the part of speech is provided for the student; "More Work with Sentences" is similar but uses new sentences and does not include the support of the part of speech clue. These exercises encourage students to note parts of speech and how they are used in sentences. In the Web-based version of the course, the feedback for incorrect answers reinforces the "job" each part of speech performs in a sentence and helps students make a better informed selection for their second attempt.

Before going on to the next lesson, students take a "check-up," actually a quiz. For the quiz, students select the proper vocabulary word to replace a synonym or short definition of the word used in a sentence.

Graphic Design

With an on-line course, graphic design becomes vital. When a student logs on, what he or she sees on the computer screen comes to represent both the teacher and the institution itself. For that reason alone, a clean, attractive and professional design is important. However, the importance of design can go much deeper, influencing not only student retention, but student success.

For Vocabulary Improvement, I chose the "Fireball" template provided with PowerPoint for several important reasons. First, it uses a dark background, and dark backgrounds have been shown to provide more comfortable reading for some distance learning environments. (My goal

was to design for as many environments as possible in case we decided to adapt the course later to another use.) Next, because the template consists of a single graphic on a plain, dark background, I was easily able to vary the template by changing the background color. I wanted overall consistency with a slight variation in order to signal to the student a transition between the course introduction (violet background) and the vocabulary lessons. In addition, odd numbered lessons use black backgrounds while even numbered lessons use royal blue backgrounds. Since each lesson consists of two presentations, students know they have skipped a presentation if the background color changes after only one presentation.

So far I've had the opportunity to use the Vocabulary Improvement curriculum with a small number but wide variety of students, including deaf, hard of hearing and international students. To date, I've been pleased with the results of the course. Students seem to have little or no problem understanding the course format, proceeding through the lessons and making real progress in their vocabulary development. I like to see students using their newly acquired vocabulary in original writing; when I use the curriculum in the classroom or lab, I sometimes add writing assignments. However, such a requirement seems a bit onerous and clumsy in a one hour on-line class, so I have not added it to the distance learning version. In the future, I hope to develop additional units and to add sign language video to the presentations.

Resources for On-line Course Development

Because resources and technology change rapidly, probably the best way to keep up with developments is to search the Internet frequently. The following key words are the ones I have found most useful: curriculum design; distance learning; web design; on-line course; readability.

Horton, Sarah (1999). *Curricular Computing*. Dartmouth College. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~cc/>

Houten-Kemp, Mary: *Everything Email*. Everythingemail.net/emailtips.html

HTML Resources (1999). HTML Writers Guild. 27 Mar. 1999. <http://www.hwg.org/resources/>

Lynch, Patrick (2000). *VisualLogic*. <http://patricklynch.net/>

Lynch, Patrick and Horton, Sarah (1997). *Web Style Guide*. Yale University. <http://info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/>

Steel, Warren (2000). *Hints for Web Authors*. University of Mississippi.

Teletraining Institute (2000). Teletraining Institute. www.teletrain.com

Tullis, Thomas S., Boynton, Jennifer L. and Hersh, Harry. *Readability of Fonts in the Windows Environment*. Fidelity Investments. www.acm.org/sigchi/chi95.Electronic/documents/intpost/tst_bdy.htm