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How do you...? Review and practise vocabulary at advanced level?

Irene Macías
University of Bath

One of the learning objectives of my class for first year undergraduate students, all of whom have A level Spanish, is to increase their vocabulary. Consolidating grammar and developing intercultural awareness are also important aims, but the exponential increase in their vocabulary is probably one of the most tangible outcomes of the year for students. Vocabulary is notoriously difficult to measure amongst native speakers and foreign language learners alike. There is no conclusive agreement in current literature as to what constitutes standard size vocabulary for a native. Meara (2005: 76) puts the figure at around 5000 words for 'hard core' vocabulary, i.e. words that almost every native speaker knows, whereas Schmitt (2006: 64) writes that 'a vocabulary of 40,000 words would be considered "sufficiently large" for native English speakers'. Likewise, when it comes to learners of a foreign language, there is no consensus as to what volume of vocabulary is sufficient to be able to interact successfully with others or to respond to authentic texts. There is agreement, however, on the fact that extensive reading is the best way to expand vocabulary, and that the elimination of reading from many A level syllabi is having a direct impact on students' vocabulary size. Grammatical accuracy is fundamental to successful communication, but so too is a good range of vocabulary, allowing for a more sophisticated and nuanced expression.

With this in mind, all the texts read and analysed weekly in class come with some exercise that focuses on vocabulary, very often asking students to provide a synonym for each of the words highlighted. These words are usually selected on account of their usefulness and/or their frequency in the target language. If students are asked to provide a synonym, they can learn the new word through hopefully activating their existing knowledge, as they may already know alternatives to the new term. For instance, the very first text is about young people in Spain and the colloquialism 'currar' is used by one of the young persons interviewed. This is not a term the majority has come across but they all know the verb 'trabajar'. Another example is the word 'envergadura', a rather formal term that can be useful in essay writing. An adequate equivalent could be

'importancia', a cognate all the students know.

Half way through the semester, when the new words offered in the learning material amount to a sizeable quantity, I often get the whole class to review new vocabulary through a game, 'Tres en raya'. When I reveal the name of the activity, I don't give the English translation for it, I let the students work it out. When they realise what game I am referring to, I ask for a volunteer or two to explain the rules of this simple game. This in itself is a good activity as the student has to find ways to describe something that the rest of the class is familiar with, so often others can chime in and fill gaps. Once we are all agreed how to play it, I divide the class into two teams (given the size of a seminar group, this can mean up to 10 players in each team). In a big grid which I project onto the screen, I show them nine words seen in class, each one in one square. Before the game starts, I give the teams a few minutes to check amongst themselves what they remember without checking their notes. The point of this is that they rely on each other and maximise the advantages of working in a team. Once this 'warm-up' time is up, we decide which team starts by doing 'cara o cruz' (heads or tails), thus offering most of them another opportunity to learn a new expression.

Each team then takes it in turn to pick a word. For each word, the team has to make up a sentence that includes the word and demonstrates, without any shadow of ambiguity, that they understand its meaning. Definitions are not allowed, and nor are synonyms. The sentence has to be produced within a few minutes in order to keep the activity dynamic and to add a challenging element to it. I sometimes add the requirement that the sentence has to be reasonably complex, rather than just contain a noun, verb and object. Once they come up with a sentence, the opposing team has to check it for accuracy, as no mistakes are allowed. If the sentence is grammatically correct and it meets the requirement of demonstrating understanding, the team can claim it. Otherwise, the word goes to the other team, which has the chance to get the word if they can either correct the sentence that contains the error or

provide their own. In order to claim a row, each team has to pick three adjacent words. As in the original game, this makes for a very energising element of competition in the class, as each team tries to block the other. The first team to make a row wins the game. At that point the game is finished, though if there are words left on the grid I go through them to make sure that everyone understands them.

I have been doing this activity for a few years now and it is always successful. If the class seems a bit lethargic and not very cohesive when I walk in, I start with 'Tres en raya' to energise the group. The activity has a wonderful enlivening effect, getting students talking animatedly amongst themselves, which I find sets them up well for the rest of the class. Sometimes I do it at the end of the session, sealing the work done in class with a lighter note, so to speak. A number of variants can be introduced. Instead of asking teams to produce a sentence, they could be asked to come up with a number of synonyms and/or antonyms. The game could be used to revise verbs and tenses too. The permutations are numerous. The advantages are that

the game fosters collaboration; it adds an element of competition that nobody finds threatening, since each team has collective ownership of their answers; and it provides an oral form of revision that takes students away from the written page.

Finally, a note on time and lesson planning. In my experience, the activity requires about 15 minutes - especially if the students are asked to provide complex sentences - though probably less if the activity consists of conjugating verbs or providing synonyms.

Address for correspondence:
mlsim@bath.ac.uk

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