

Vertical Sentences

DESCRIPTION

This is a teaching strategy that works in any content area. It requires students and the teacher collaboratively generate synonyms for words within a given sentence. Once synonyms are generated, those that work within the context of the sentence are used to form new syntactic variations of the sentence.

PURPOSE

English learners, particularly those at the intermediate level, over-rely on the semantic element of language, focusing more on the meaning of individual words than on the syntactic context in which the words are used. We can simultaneously work on lexicon, semantics and syntax with this powerful strategy that really boosts comprehension and syntactic control.

KEY LANGUAGE SKILLS

Lexicon, semantics and syntax.

MATERIALS

Colored markers, half sheets of large chart paper.

PROCEDURES

1. The teacher selects a sentence that features syntactic and vocabulary features that are appropriate to the students' English language level. These sentences can be made up, come from other ELD strategies, or taken from a variety of text sources, i.e., language arts books, science, social science or math. The sentences could even come from the back of a cereal box! Here is an example.

Covered wagons and trains were popular forms of transportation for the early settlers.

2. Now, the teacher writes the sentence on a half-sheet of chart paper, leaving a large space in between the lines of text.

*Covered wagons and trains were popular forms of
transportation for early settlers.*



3. The teacher can now do one of two things, depending on students' language level: (1) underline the words for which students will generate synonyms, or, (2) collaboratively analyze with students which words in the sentence could have synonyms. Underline those words. Here is what it looks like so far:

*Covered wagons and trains were popular forms of
transportation for the early settlers.*

4. Working in pairs, groups of three, or even as a whole class, students are asked to think of words they know that may mean the same things as the underlined words. This is not a dictionary task, but rather a time to begin teaching students to index their existing vocabulary. Guesses are acceptable, but the teacher decides if the word is indeed a synonym. Note that at this point, the context of the sentence, or the syntax, is not taken into consideration. That will be dealt with in a subsequent step.
5. Generate synonyms for each word. The teacher should volunteer words that are important for students to know. The intent is to make generating synonyms an active – even fun – process! Here's what you might end up with.

*Covered wagons and trains were popular forms of
carts locomotives means
buckboards iron horses types*

*transportation for the early settlers.
movement
moving
travel*

6. Now, once you have reviewed each vertical column of synonyms to see if indeed they are synonyms, move to an analysis of which synonyms work within the context of the sentence. Note that the syntax (words and their order) of the original sentence may need to be changed to accommodate one or more of the new synonyms. This is a powerful time to assist you students in understanding better how syntax affects word choice.
7. Put students in pairs, or groups of three, and have them make new sentences using each of the various synonyms. Have them write their new sentences so they can better understand the concepts involved in this task.





HOT TIPS

It is the teacher's role, in this strategy, to both excite students about constructive guessing for new synonyms, and to simultaneously instruct them on issues of semantics and of how syntax affects the proper word choice. There is a lot of language teaching to be done with this strategy, so make the most of it. Write the sentences on chart paper so you can display them on the wall and help students to see what they are learning and now to use them as resources in their other English language and content area tasks.

EXTENSIONS

1. Take a non-academic sentence and generate academic synonyms for as many words as possible. Compare the two versions.
2. Rate each column of synonyms in order of their use in an academic setting. This helps students to understand the effect words have when used properly in certain situations.
3. Assign groups of students one of the sentences from a paragraph. Re-read the whole paragraph now using all of the various synonyms.

