

## CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

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### How Synonyms Differ

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Often, when teachers are introducing a new vocabulary word, they define it by giving students a synonym for the word. So, for example, if a teacher introduces the word, *increase*, the teacher might say it is similar in meaning to *expand*. While this is a good strategy for giving students the general meaning of a word, there are several dangers in using synonyms to define a word.

First, words can have different connotations or associations. For instance, the word *slim* and *skinny* both refer to a person who is quite light in weight. However, whereas it is a compliment to call someone *slim*, it is far less positive to call someone *skinny*. The same might be said of the words, *strange* and *odd*, with the latter word being much more negative in connotation. In short different words have different affective meanings and hence, it can be dangerous to tell students that two words, such as *slim* and *skinny*, are identical.

Second, words can have different collocation patterns. Collocations refer to the manner in which certain words tend to go with other words. For example, although the words *announce* and *declare* both mean to say something, they tend to occur with different objects. *Declare* often occurs with words such as *war* and *bankruptcy*, whereas *announce* occurs more frequently with words like *engagement*, *promotion*, and *birth*. If we consider the words *increase* and *expand*, *increase* unlike *expand* tends to occur with numbers so that one would say “Interest rates increased by two percent” not “Interest rates expanded by two percent.”

Synonyms can also differ in whether or not they occur with animate or inanimate subjects and objects. For example, the words *cherish* and *worship* both mean to revere something. However, while people can cherish something like a memory or a wedding ring, no one would say they worship a memory or a wedding ring. In short, while the word *cherish* can take inanimate objects, the word *worship* does not tend to occur with an inanimate object. Similarly while we can say a person is *slim* or *skinny*, we rarely hear someone say a dog is *slim*. Instead it would be more common to say a dog is *skinny*. Also it is common to say that a duck *waddles* but we rarely say that a person *waddles* unless it is a very fat person.

Knowing whether a word occurs with an animate or inanimate subject or object is learned over time as a person hears the word in context on many occasions. This is a natural part of becoming familiar with a language. The danger in saying words are synonyms is that students may think synonyms can be interchanged with one another in any context and as we have seen, this is clearly not the case. While there are advantages to telling students that two words have similar meanings, it is important to make clear to students that no two words are completely identical and so when learning synonyms they also need to learn how the words differ. One way that teachers can do this is to introduce two or three synonyms at a time and focus on how the words differ. What follows are some examples of how this might be done.

For beginning level students you might present very simple synonyms to contrast, as for example, the difference between a *meal* and a *feast*. Ask students in what way the words are similar, leading students to respond with something like they both deal with eating something. Then ask them how they differ. Here students may say that while a meal is something people have every day and often three times a day, a feast is something that is eaten for a special event like a holiday or a wedding.

For more advanced students, you might give them three or four words to compare. For example, you could give them the words *stagger*, *stumble*, *hobble* and *limp*. While they all share the meaning or feature of walking, the question is how they differ. To answer this question, you could put students in groups of two or three students and have them discuss how they differ. Next have the whole class share the findings of the groups. Finally, as a way of making certain students understand the differences in the meaning of these words, have students write a sentence for each word that demonstrates how the word is unique as, for example, “The young man staggered out of the bar after an evening of drinking.”

Ultimately while it is useful for students to learn words that have similar meanings, it is important for students to understand how words differ in their meaning, connotation and collocation patterns. Rather than have students acquire this slowly over time by seeing and hearing words in context, teachers can do a great deal to speed up this process by showing students how synonyms differ and by encouraging them to always consider in what ways similar words differ.

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