

Using Neologisms: A Way to Teach Vocabulary and Intercultural Awareness during Online Instruction

by Sezgi Acar

The current pandemic has affected the status quo of classroom instruction around the world. Many teachers are now learning the fundamentals of teaching online and doing their best to keep students engaged and motivated. Classroom content now takes the form of online presentations on online platforms through video recordings and with the help of various online tools. To spice up the vocabulary instruction in online settings, I would like to discuss the importance of implementing neologisms into vocabulary instruction and propose a few tools that would enhance vocabulary instruction.

What is a Neologism?

In his book, *Fifty Years Among the New Words*, Algeo (1993) notes that “A community is known by the language it keeps, and its words chronicle the times. Every aspect of a people’s life is reflected in the words they use to talk about themselves and the world around them. As their world changes – through invention, discovery, revolution, evolution, or personal transformation – so does their language.” This quote accommodates two compelling concepts: Language acts as an indicator of the history, which means that the language we use today illustrates today’s world and concepts; secondly, vocabulary is the living proof of the change the world endures (McDonald, 2004). Cultures change, so do the words; a solid example for this would be that every year, an average of 600–1000 words make their way into the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). These are the newly coined words, also known as *neologisms*.

The word neologism has been defined by various scholars and dictionaries as “a newly coined word or expression, or the coining or use of new words” (Lexico.com, n.d.) On the other hand, Peter Newmark (1998) says that “Neologisms can be identified as newly coined lexical units or existing lexical units that acquire a new sense” (as cited in Bahera & Mishra, 2013, p. 26). It means that neologism can also be an existing word with additional different meanings. For instance, while “vape” is a newly created word for a

recently existing concept, the word “snowflake” is an existing word that has shifted in meaning, gaining a new string to it. In 1983, the word “snowflake” was used to describe a person’s unique qualities because each snowflake has a distinctive shape. However, the word is now used for describing “a person who is easily offended, overly sensitive, emotionally fragile” which shows that the word lost its positive connotation and adopted a negative meaning (Dictionary.com, n.d.). As can be seen, neologisms represent the evolving culture, the dynamism of a language, and what matters at the time. Besides, it is possible to track cultural changes by observing new words that are added to the dictionary. However, instead of monitoring every new word in the dictionary each year, one can evaluate the changing norms by delving into the “Word of the Year” chosen by the Oxford English Dictionaries (OED).

The Word of the Year by OED

Every year, experts at Oxford Dictionaries announce the Word of the Year. They define it as “a word or expression that has attracted a great deal of interest over the last 12 months.” Experts debate several candidates for the Word of the Year and choose a winner that is “judged to reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of that particular year and to have lasting potential as a word of cultural significance” (Oxford Languages, n.d.) It is not only a word that is used the most throughout the year or a word that becomes unpredictably popular. It is a word that is considered to have a potential cultural significance. Words that bear cultural significance undoubtedly represent a significant portion of the culture and the language they belong to; therefore, neologisms should be involved in language classrooms.

Recent research shows that 98% of the students say they would like to have neologisms implemented in their language lessons. According to the study, participating students said that learning neologisms “increases the potential for language imagination and creativity,” “boosts students’ motivation and interest towards language

lessons,” and “is very informative in its nature” (Rets, 2016).

It seems vital to teach neologisms considering the role of culture in teaching a foreign/second language. Besides, since neologisms reflect the English language spoken “here and now,” including them in English vocabulary lessons is important (Rets, 2016). I will present a few online tools to help teachers develop certain strategies of teaching this group of lexical units and give some tips on how to integrate them in vocabulary instruction.

Warm it up via Polleverywhere.com

The instructor can ask warm-up questions with the help of polleverywhere.com. Polleverywhere.com can either be added to presentations or used separately as a website. An example of a warm-up question that could be used on polleverywhere.com, in the section called “Word Cloud,” is “What does *neologism* mean? Guess away! (No full sentences).” Students are able to write their answers using their phones. This will enable teachers to see every student’s answer at once, and through this app, every student will have a chance to contribute, which means no student will be neglected. This also ensures that shy students will be able to share their guesses and opinions on the question.

Time Travel with Merriam-Webster

Merriam-Webster offers a feature called “Time Traveler,” which reveals the words that were first used in print by the given year.

By looking at the words under a given year, one can analyze what was being discussed and what happened around the world in that year. For example, the year 1999 was the year “blogs” were born; it was also the same year when people started enticing YouTube visitors with surprising pictures or titles into clicking. Therefore, a word for this particular concept was needed; this is when “clickbait” was born. Students can select a year and discuss what might have occurred during the year they entered by looking at the words. This could either be a discussion or a writing activity.

COCA

As J. Flowerdew (2009) says, “no dictionary or grammar is able to describe the language” (p. 329) entirely.

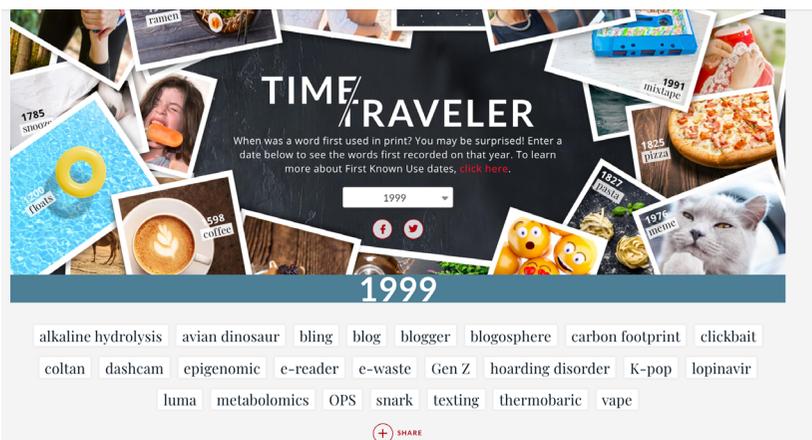


Figure 2: Merriam-Webster's Time Traveler

A corpus, an extensive database of language, steps in to unveil grammatical and lexical patterns of a language in its most authentic form. Authentic input is crucial, especially in a language classroom. A corpus is effective because its power lies in the combination of frequency data regarding all the words in a corpus and the verbal environment in which these words occur. Since corpora allow access to authentic data and show frequency patterns of words and grammar structures at the click of a mouse, the use of a corpus in a language classroom becomes an appealing asset. In other words, corpus linguistics enables us to describe missing pieces that students might not be exposed to traditionally from other data (Flowerdew, 2009).

Students can use NOW Corpus (News on the Web) to see how the word of the year is used in context and what words it collocates with most frequently. First, remind students of what a “Word of the Year” is and then show the word of the year for, for example, 2018: toxic, on the smartboard. Have students search the NOW Corpus for toxic.

As can be seen in Figure 3, their findings will reveal the most-used collocations of the word “toxic.” Figure 4 shows collocations, the context the collations are used in, and lastly the years of frequency. The first most frequent word that was created after 2018 is “toxic masculinity.” After examining the context in which “toxic masculinity” has been used, students will see that the word was in the spotlight with social movements and political events, such as the #MeToo movement. Corpus data reveals the term “toxic masculinity” has “taken root in the public consciousness” (Oxford Languages, 2018).

The other collocations that seemed to appear in recent years are “toxic environment” and “toxic culture.” The terms “toxic environment” and “toxic culture” have been frequently used to reference harmful workplace environments that directly affect the workforce’s mental health. The context each collocation was used in demonstrates that many companies this year have been called out and exposed as examples of “demanding workloads” and “sexual harassment.” The other term that has seen a rise



Figure 3: Collocates of the word 'toxic' as found on COCA.

	CONTEXT	ALL	2010-1	2010-2	2011-1	2011-2	2012-1	2012-2	2013-1	2013-2	2014-1	2014-2	2015-1	2015-2	2016-1	2016-2	2017-1	2017-2	2018-1	2018-2	2019-1	2019-2	
1	<input type="checkbox"/>	CHEMICALS	6137	164	175	195	172	164	174	207	209	251	184	196	243	366	440	450	465	507	484	625	466
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	WASTE	4165	124	104	122	119	149	132	140	161	107	163	126	131	356	323	321	284	213	277	586	227
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	SUBSTANCES	3125	78	87	61	74	102	70	80	82	122	106	101	98	180	232	278	290	273	284	331	196
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	MASCULINITY	2702					1	3	2	2	6	7	12	21	115	124	241	360	544	842	422	
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	FUMES	2139	25	19	27	37	30	22	40	46	53	40	44	44	136	224	215	193	206	180	450	108
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	AIR	1953	6	6	7	31	26	15	19	19	31	17	30	52	84	195	167	273	141	323	365	146
7	<input type="checkbox"/>	GAS	1845	19	22	22	25	23	22	35	52	19	28	21	60	58	197	320	145	399	137	174	67
8	<input type="checkbox"/>	ALGAE	1548	6	16	11	14	12	28	31	13	17	26	38	109	105	121	107	172	118	181	238	185
9	<input type="checkbox"/>	GASES	1446	11	17	21	17	23	13	20	30	35	37	15	38	81	149	93	144	281	153	197	71
10	<input type="checkbox"/>	EFFECTS	1346	45	44	40	50	35	35	42	52	34	55	40	42	93	119	102	108	95	123	100	92
11	<input type="checkbox"/>	ENVIRONMENT	1344	12	17	13	6	14	22	21	27	22	29	34	32	106	87	95	208	184	168	170	77
12	<input type="checkbox"/>	RELATIONSHIP	1286	5	6	12	11	10	13	13	10	20	13	22	37	62	91	116	176	142	183	208	136
13	<input type="checkbox"/>	CULTURE	1174	1	1	6	2	6	9	16	5	12	12	7	27	57	52	87	121	162	251	196	144
14	<input type="checkbox"/>	SUBSTANCE	1143	20	13	19	18	35	28	29	38	33	23	41	28	65	116	175	110	78	80	132	62

Figure 4: Collocations, the context the collations are used in, and the years of frequency for 'toxic'

is “toxic relationship” which can be associated with both “toxic culture” and “toxic masculinity.” The term has been used to describe unpleasant and harmful relationships between partners, co-workers, and family members. Through Corpus, students will be able to elicit what these collocations mean through analyzing the contexts in which they have been used, which may increase their metacognitive awareness.

Using Padlet in Collaborative Learning

Students can reinforce their knowledge of neologisms by creating a collaborative wall on Padlet, which can be accessed online. Padlet provides a free virtual wall where users can add boxes to create content and share comments. The platform is versatile and straightforward. It is very easy to navigate. In this scenario, the wall can

consist of students’ findings, comments, videos, and reading passages from NOW Corpus. While students collaboratively add information to the wall, other students will be able to comment, like, or dislike their peers’ posts.

Conclusion

Exploring the world of neologisms can help learners equip themselves to have a better understanding of how English evolves and why new words are continuously created. Introducing language learners to this area can be a key skill in helping them to become more autonomous in their language learning process and develop a greater enjoyment and engagement with the language since neologisms will not only provide a simple word meaning, but it also will come with a cultural string to it. With the help of computer-mediated language learning tools, learners have ultimate access to the world of words.

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