

Why We Can't Just Teach Words

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If we just teach words, in lists, and have the kids write them down, it does nothing. It wastes time. That is because, if words are to be alive, they need roots and stems and leaves and connections to other plants and insects and, especially, they must find connection to the nourishment given in the soil where lies the true source of language – the unconscious mind.

Carl Jung talked about the conscious mind, the personal unconscious mind, and the collective unconscious, where lies the history of the race. I think that language is connected to the third category. That makes it three times removed from the conscious mind. And yet most language teachers still teach in the realm of the conscious mind. How strange!

How really pointless is the old way of taking apart language and expecting it to live! How sad it is to separate the plant/word from the root, which is the source of its life. It dies when it is taken away, taken apart, made to live in a list. It dies in the way enzymes and other live nutrients die in food when it is packaged.

No wonder our society seems so dead, why are school buildings seem so lifeless. We consume food that is dead, cut off from life, and many of us teach kids that language is nothing more than a disconnected set of activities in a dry and boring class environment, where words are, as it were, put under glass in lists, where they cannot possibly live.

I once saw a teacher giving a word list to a class. Each word had a number, and then, next to it, a meaning. It was like being in a grocery store and looking at a row of cereal boxes and trying to remember what the food those boxes contained looked like when it was part of the land, if it ever was. In that class there was no connection to the real language, the way it sounds when spoken by native speakers, when it has clear life, vibrant life, sun life.

I couldn't make the connection and the kids couldn't either. How can we expect them to connect solitary words to the vibrant, lush, alive language system that is the real curriculum, when they are sitting in a classroom where books and computers and chapters and lists dominate the "instruction"?

Language classrooms are very similar to grocery stores in that way. Empty of anything real that can really nourish humans in the real way that most of us have forgotten, those victory gardens of the past, they reek of children who languish.

If there is to be any change in this dark scenario, it must come from those who understand Krashen and who thus see that there must be a connection in language classes between the words and all the things that make words live – all those other things that bring life to them.

What brings life to our classes? The same things that brings life to life!

Consider:

- Life without meaning is empty. Language learning without meaning is empty.
- Life without interest is empty. Language learning without interest is empty.
- Life that is not compelling is empty. Language learning that is not compelling is empty.
- Life that does not teach repetitive lessons, which we need because life is complex, is empty. Language learning that does not contain repetition is also empty, because we need repetition to learn languages.
- Life that hurries by is empty. Language classes that go too fast because the teacher has no self-discipline are, for our students, devoid of meaning.
- Life that is not personalized, that is, about us, is boring. Language classes that are not about our students are boring to them.

We can bring these changes using comprehensible input. We can teach our classes by sending down deep into the soil of the unconscious mind roots that connect us to the domain of real language – the deeper mind. It's an unconscious process. TPRS/CI/TCI whatever you want to call it, when done properly, puts the roots down deep, where they then lead, ever so slowly, to real fluency and to great professional happiness.