

## A Word Mining Activity for Learning Adjectives of Personality

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Although conventional wisdom prescribes teaching vocabulary in small, controlled amounts, there are arguments for providing students a vocabulary-rich environment. Blair (1982) compares the classroom to a “mine” filled with “gems” of language. Instead of being forced to work with what they find in a small area, students should be allowed to move freely in the mine, gathering the “gems” of language they like. Others have voiced similar views (see Carter and McCarthy, 1988, p. 41-48).

“Word mining” allows students to personalize their vocabulary learning. This is especially important for learners in mixed-level and higher-level classes, where differences in ability and learning needs clearly emerge. The notion of word mining doesn’t designate any particular set of activities, but rather an approach to teaching and learning that emphasizes autonomy. In its most obvious form it involves giving learners the freedom to choose the materials they will learn from and what words, phrases, and expressions they will select for further study.

As a “word mine” nothing surpasses the dictionary, and this is doubly true of a bilingual one. However, the variety of words one encounters is impressive to the point of being overwhelming. Still, no good prospector digs around indiscriminately; a good map is a great help in limiting the territory. In this case, the teacher can provide the “map” by selecting vocabulary according to an overarching function or topic and presenting it in a bilingual list. The activity described below will show how large (40 words or more) bilingual lists of vocabulary, organized by domain or theme, can be written and used along with interview questions to give learners the chance to encounter unknown words multiple times and thus improve their chance of learning them. While the activity can be adapted to any level, the list presented below is designed for intermediate or higher learners.

### Designing the Bilingual Word List

The first step in designing the word list is to decide on a unifying topic or function. The topic or function has an important function of connecting the vocabulary to its context of use. The topic used here as an example is “Personality”, and all the words selected are adjectives.

The second step is to make the vocabulary list. To avoid overloading the students with unknown vocabulary, a bilingual word list is essential. Given the bad reputation bilingual word lists have gotten, this may not seem like a good idea since a common objection to bilingual word lists is their inherent lack of contextual support. In a properly designed word mining activity, this problem is overcome, at least in part, by the unifying theme and the context supplied by the interview questions. The vocabulary is organized in rows, with four or five columns of lines between each row. The number of columns corresponds to the number of interview questions to be asked during the activity. Each column is given a number which corresponds to the number of an interview question. In the case of the “Personality” activity described here, all

adjectives need to have a positive connotation because the activity is an “ice breaker” which involves some personal questions. Using negative adjectives in this activity could easily cause embarrassment.

## Doing the Activity

### *Pronunciation*

The class needs to be organized into pairs (small groups will also work) and each student should have a copy of the word list. Because the students will be working mostly on their own, it is important that they be able to pronounce the words properly. Because repeating the entire list is time consuming and boring, it is better to give the students a few minutes to scan the list and mark any words they don't know the pronunciation or stress for. They then ask for help by indicating the word by location (i.e. “the fifth word from the bottom of column three”), repeating words and adding stress marks after the teacher has modeled the word.

### *Scanning*

The next step is to have the students read the first interview question silently, choose five adjectives to answer the question, and tick or otherwise mark the selected words in column one. This process is repeated again with question 2 (marked in column 2), and so on until all of the questions have been answered.

The word list itself does not have the interview questions written on it. This is done on purpose to keep the students in suspense about the ultimate purpose of the list. Once they have completed the preliminary steps, I write the first three interview questions on the board, which they answer silently:

1. What kind of person would you say you are? Choose five adjectives.
2. What kind of person would you say you aren't? Choose five adjectives.
3. What kind of person would you like to be? Choose five adjectives.
4. What would your “dream partner” (husband or wife) be like? Choose five adjectives.

### *First Pair Interview*

After they have marked their answers for the first four questions, the interviews can begin. Given the slightly personal nature of the question I use (they can be easily changed, of course), pairings with friends are best. Student A asks the question as written and student B should answer in a complete sentence. Students should be encouraged to continue discussing the topic through at least one more exchange:

- A: What kind of person would you say you are?  
B: I think/I'd say I am ~  
A: (question/comment/etc.)  
B: (response)

### *Second Scanning, Second Interview*

After the first four interview questions are finished, each student should find a new partner, preferably someone they don't know well. Instruct them that they should just have a

free conversation and not use the word list. After about three to five minutes, write the fifth question on the board:

5. What's your impression of your partner? Choose five adjectives.

Since all of the vocabulary on the word list is positive, there is no risk of insulting one's partner, so the question is a safe one. However, some guided responses will probably be needed. One useful expression is "You strike me as (being)..." If there is time the questions can be done again since everyone has a new partner. In later classes, new questions can be used so that students can review the list, such as "What qualities should a teacher have?" and "Describe someone you admire."

## Conclusion

Word mining activities are not the easiest materials to create, but once made can be used any number of times and shared around. It's worth the trouble, though, because word mining activities like this are quite stimulating for students.

## References

- Blair, R. W. (1982). *Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (1988). *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*. London: Longman.