

Business Languages Column

## The Word is Business

*Margaret Gonglewski, The George Washington University*

I'll never forget the incredible tension in the room: the pressure to get it right, the agony in the actual attempt, culminating in the stinging disappointment of failure. Not only do I vividly recall my first spelling bee, I can remember the word I lost on: business.

Fortunately, the ego blow didn't last too long, since not one other third-grader down the line after me was able to spell it either. But our teacher recognized a "teachable moment" long before they were commonly called that, and she used the opportunity to get us thinking about how words are not always spelled the way they are spoken. She helped us think through ways to decipher word spellings and meanings, dissecting words for their parts. And -- though it wouldn't necessarily help us win future spelling bees -- she taught us the value of getting help from context.

The formative experience stuck with me because of this helpful advice, and it returns to me particularly when I teach my business German class. As with other classes, I ask students to write down their goals, what they hope to learn and be able to do by the end of the course. Inevitably, all students include as their primary, if not *exclusive* goal: "To master business vocabulary."

Not surprisingly, though, the business world does not function on individual words, let alone lists of them. They comprise just some of the building blocks for larger communicative events that only gain meaning once they are contextualized, and their meanings can be morphed according to e.g., when, how, and by whom they are used.

This is not to say that my students' strong focus on vocabulary-building is off the mark. The Common Core also aims for students to "acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases..." which, while they are focused on English language skills, parallels through the focus on the Language System, or the "weave element" of the National Standards for Learning Languages (Alignment, p.17).

Some even argue that vocabulary-building of specific terms is even more important in Language for Specific Purposes courses than in traditional language courses. Schierloh and Paulsell (2010) point out that for business language learners, "there are very specific vocabulary items and phrases that must be used in specific contexts," and that circumlocuting these specific words can expose a non-native speaker as someone who has not "mastered the specific lexica of the business environment" (p.62).

Our challenge as business language teachers, then, is to develop effective strategies to help students acquire complex, specific business vocabulary. We can experiment by pushing ourselves and our students to think beyond the mere list of words, since lists create the illusion that words function in a disconnected way.

An exciting approach that blows the traditional “vocab list” out of the water is one that appeals to the new generation of learners, who are visually-oriented and who think less linearly than pen-and-paper generations before them.

Tools like word maps<sup>1</sup> are particularly useful for helping students build on their previous vocabulary, but they also offer a graphic approach to support visual learning. Using a word map, students represent a word visually, by drawing a picture of it or finding an appropriate graphic to illustrate the meaning, explore its connections to other words, by providing synonyms and antonyms that they are already familiar with, expand their knowledge of the word's forms, by identifying potential grammatical forms (like compound words, past tense forms), and use it (or find it) in a meaningful context.

As with a *Wortfeld* or semantic field, a word map encourages learners to think beyond the single word and integrate the word along with its meanings/forms/uses into their own, already internalized meaning system. They can make the necessary adjustments as they encounter the word in multiple different, culturally steeped contexts.

A different kind of visual representation of contextualized words is word clouds, also known as “text clouds.” Online word cloud generators take textual input – text you or your students have created or existing text, such as an assigned reading, and make key words visible. The size and emphasis of words in the graphs represent their importance (vis-à-vis their occurrence) in the text. As an example, the word cloud below was created using the web resource [Tagul](#) and the text from an article in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* about the financial crisis in Greece:



Alignment of the National Standards for Learning Languages with the Common Core State Standards, 2012. Available at: <http://www.actfl.org/news/reports/alignment-the-national-standards-learning-languages-the-common-core-state-standards>