

Ideas from the Corpora

Oh, What d'you m'call it? - coping Language

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[Editorial Note: due to immense pressure of work with the launch of the of the *Macmillan English Dictionary*, of which he is editor-in-chief, Michael Rundell is unable to write his usual column for HLT.

Steven Procter has come forward to fill the gap, even though his article is not based on work from the corpora. Thank you, Steven.]

It is sometimes difficult to recall that particular thing or such and such's name at the moment we speak, isn't it? It's a natural phenomenon of course and we do find ways to combat our absentmindedness, our inability to be specific or precise. We can resort to vague language such as 'it's (a) sort of/'kind of', 'it's kinda like', etc - all expressions that have come into existence precisely in order to provide a comparative representation of what we mean. They allow us to fill the hiatus, give the listener an indication of what we're trying to communicate and provide a, hoped for, opportunity to 'get there in the end'. I'm talking here from the perspective of a native speaker but how can we help our students to cope in similar circumstances in their second language?

Here is a list of expressions (the source for most is *The New Penguin English Dictionary* CD-ROM, Penguin Books, 2000) that are very rarely taught in the second language classroom but which may be of great use to English language students inside and outside of the classroom, particularly if they are learning for academic, scientific or work-related purposes:

- 1 **Doodah** /¹du:ɔɑ:/ [doo-darh] An informal British term, used to describe a small article whose name is unknown or forgotten. Equivalents are: **Duberry** /¹du:bri/ [doo-bri]; **Doohickey** /¹du:,hiki/ [doo-hiki] - North American; **Doofer** /¹du:fə/ [doo-fah] - which perhaps derives from 'Do for now.'
- 2 **Thingamajig** (or, **Thingumajig**) /¹θɪŋəmədʒɪg/ [thing-imi-jig] Used to describe something or somebody that is hard to classify or whose name is unknown or forgotten. Equivalents are: **Thingamabob** /¹θɪŋəməbɒb/ [thing-ami-bob]; **Thingy/-ies** /¹θɪŋi/ [thingi]; **Thingummy/-ies** /¹θɪŋəmi/ or /¹θɪŋʌmi/[thing-ami]. Examples: "What's thingamajig's name? You know... he was in *Silence of the Lambs*." "Oh, those pyramid-shaped thingies." "The old thingie who lives down the road."
- 3 **Whatsit** /¹wɒtsɪt/ [wot-sit] Used to describe somebody or something that is of unspecified, nondescript, or unknown character, or whose name has been forgotten. Equivalent: **Whatnot** /¹wɒt,nɒt/ [wot-not]. Examples: "Can you pass the whatsit." "He was seen carrying all his bags and whatnot out of the house this morning."
- 4 **Whatsurname/Whatshisname** /¹wɒtsə,neɪm/,
/¹wɒtsɪz,neɪm/ Used when you cannot recall someone's name. Example: "John whatshisname called round earlier for you."
- 5 **What d'you call him/her/them** /¹wɒdʒə,kɔ:lɪm/,
/¹-,kɔ:lə/, /¹-,kɔ:ləm/ Used to replace a forgotten name. Example: "I need to contact their Sales Representative immediately. What d'you call her...?"
- 6 **What d'you call it** /¹wɒdʒə,kɔ:lɪt/[wot-dya-kor-lit] Used to replace an unknown or forgotten name of an article. Equivalent: **what d'you m'call it** /¹wɒdʒəmə,kɔ:lɪt/[wot-dya-mi-kor-lit]. This last example contains the strange phenomenon of the inclusion of an apparently ungrammatical and redundant phone /-mə-/ and I have no explanation for it; it just is! Example: "This element fits into this part of the machine, the what d'you call it, just here."

Two possible ways of introducing the expressions

1 A version of 'Kim's Game' (see P. Ur & A. Wright, *Five-Minute Activities*, CUP, 1992). Collect a number of objects together - these should be a mix of some that you know the class knows in English and some that they don't know - and show them to the class one at a time as you put them into a bag. Then ask the class to quickly write down what the objects are. Take them out one at a time again and ask what they are. When they can't say exactly what an object is, ask the class to describe the object's purpose. Then respond using one or two of the above expressions, for example:

S: "It takes the skin off vegetables"

T: "So we can say it's a vegetable doodah or a whatnot for taking..." [= a *potato peeler*]

Now ask them to think of the ways they can say something like this in their own language, introduce them to more of the English 'equivalents' and discuss their purpose and value to second language speakers.

2 Inventions Card Game. Write the names of some inventions and inventors on strips of paper or card about the same size as playing cards and shuffle them. You will need one set of cards per group of 6-8 students. Ask them to pick up one card at a time. If it has the name of an invention, they try to provide the name of the inventor and vice versa. Monitor the activity and when you see that they genuinely can't remember a name or invention supply them with the appropriate expression(s) - in the manner of Community Language Learning - so that they can continue to communicate with each other: "Oh, whatshername? I'm trying to remember. Help me, someone" or "He invented a doofah for..." At some point they will turn over a card later that was the match for what they couldn't earlier recall. They may be able to remember the name, but if not they now have the means to say that they can't remember for a second time with the likelihood that someone will be able

to help them get there in the end!

Profile

I am a freelance teacher and teacher trainer. I was the Academic Manager of the International Language Institute in Leeds for 8 years before taking up residence in Warsaw, Poland. I am currently interested in academic management training, teacher correction strategies and writing specialist courses for business professionals.

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