Head in the clouds?

Clare Fielder has some practical ways to make word clouds more than just a pretty picture.

Word clouds – or tag clouds – are pretty and colourful, and you can have fun making them whilst still calling it 'work'. This may explain why they seem to be popping up all over the place at the moment! I've seen them on conference invites, on posters and on worksheets for the classroom.

However, recently I stopped to ask myself: *How helpful is that word cloud?* I suspect that most of the time they are only there to look nice and to help fill some empty space on a piece of paper, whilst also attracting the reader's attention. But actually, there are plenty more effective things we can do with word clouds in our teaching. This article contains just a short list of learning/teaching activities that occur to me at the moment, and which I think are adaptable to lots of different teaching contexts.

What is a word cloud?

Basically, a word cloud is a cloud-shaped image showing the words of a text in different colours and fonts, with the more frequent content words shown in a larger font than the less frequent ones. (Very common grammar words like *the*, *of*, and so on are usually excluded.) Other than the font size changing according to frequency, the arrangement and colouring of the words in the cloud shape is random. However, on most word cloud generators, you also have the option of changing the colour scheme, and sometimes also the position and direction of the words. On page 15 is an example of a word cloud based on the text of this article.

How do you make one?

If you'd like to make your own word cloud, you can find plenty of free websites to use. You simply copy your text or type your words into the relevant box and click on 'Generate'. The word cloud will appear. You can then save the image, or sometimes email it to yourself, for use in the classroom. Here are a couple of generator sites I like:

www.wordle.net/create
http://worditout.com/word-cloud/make-a-new-one

The sky's the limit

Once you have practised creating word clouds, my key tip would be not to get carried away and end up simply decorating all your worksheets with them! Here are my ideas of more effective ways to use word clouds in teaching:

1 'Getting to know you' game(s)

Provide a list of 'getting to know you' questions, or make them up as a class. Each student then makes a word cloud from their answers. They can use this to initiate conversations and small talk with other students, or wear it like a name tag on the first day of a new course. Alternatively, collect the information from the students before class and make a word cloud for each one. Show the word clouds in the lesson and ask the

students to try to guess who each cloud is about, as a 'getting to know you' game.

2 Reporting survey results

Get the students to do a class survey, using questions related to a given topic or which require the people answering them to use a certain grammar point. Then ask the students to make a word cloud of the answers they receive. They can display the word cloud and use it to describe the results of their survey, instead of using a bar/pie chart or other traditional graphs.

3 Guessing the focus of a text

Give the students a word cloud made from a text you are going to read, and ask them to use it to guess what the text is going to be about. Make sure they understand that the most common words in the text will be the largest words in the cloud, and get them to identify the most important content words. New words can be pre-taught from the word cloud. Then ask the students to read the text and check whether their predictions were correct.

4 Vocabulary support for a listening

If a listening text you are going to use includes some words which may be new to the students, or which are hard to make out in the audio, provide this vocabulary in the form of a word cloud made from the transcript. This will help the students to recognise the words they hear (and see the frequency with which they occur in the text) and will assist them in processing the information in the listening text.

5 Specialist vocabulary

This works particularly well with ESP classes. Ask the students to find a couple of online articles specifically related to a topic within their field of work and to make word clouds from them. The word clouds will show some key vocabulary for the subject, which they need to make sure they know. Students studying or working in different fields can compare their vocabulary and explain the specialist terms to the others.

6 Evaluating key word summaries

Get the students to read a text and pick out what they think are the most important words in it, making a list of these key words. Then give them (or ask them to make) a word cloud of the same text, and ask them to compare it with their list to see whether the words shown in the largest font are the same words that they picked out as being the most important. They can then note and evaluate any differences. (The trick here is that the word cloud shows the words which are most common in the text, not necessarily the most *significant*!)

7 Supporting text summary writing

Provide the students with a text and a word cloud made from it. Their task is to write a short summary of the text, making sure that they include all of the key words (those in large font) from the word cloud, to ensure they have all of the key points from the text.

8 New vocabulary definitions

Make a word cloud for a new vocabulary item, using the texts of dictionary definitions of that word. The students look at the word cloud of definitions and figure out which word (possibly from a list) is being defined. This is a more inductive approach to teaching new vocabulary, and the vocabulary pages of their notebooks will look far more interesting than if they simply list new words!

9 Checking for repetition

Get the students to make word clouds of their own texts, paragraphs or essays they have written, and check to see if certain words are very common, ie repeated a lot in their writing. Ask them to see if they could find synonyms or alternative phrasing, to make their written work more varied and interesting to read. This makes the word cloud personal to their language production and learning progress, and also removes some of the marking load from the teacher.

10 Reviewing

This probably works best for 'how to' or content-based lessons or projects. Make a word cloud of key points that have been covered during a lesson or series of lessons (eg how to give a presentation). As a review, get the students to identify the key words and explain why that point is important.

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For more ideas on using word clouds, see Tanja Debevc's contribution to *It Works in Practice* on page 36.