

How Cooking Improves Vocabulary

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

A brunch and a cookbook became tools for learning new English words at the Center for Literacy. Marjorie Scharf's advanced adult ESL (English as a Second Language) class in Southwest Philadelphia uses project-based learning to help students learn new words in context instead of memorizing by rote.

Students at the Center for Literacy bring many foods, customs, and words with them from their countries of origin. "For most of us, English is not our second language. It is our third, fourth, or fifth!" These students come from many countries including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Guinea, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Haiti, Honduras, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Vietnam.

Here's how Marjorie Scharf used cooking as a theme to help students learn English words for food, spices, shopping, cooking equipment, measurements, nutrition, and cooking methods. First, small groups of students talked about how they learned to cook by watching relatives and how dishes were handed down from generation to generation. Students spoke with pride about their food and family life centered around food.

Then, Marjorie taught them about other ways to learn how to cook, such as reading recipes in magazines and packages. As another learning tool she gave them an assignment to watch online videos about food preparation. She demonstrated how to make cranberry sauce, an American tradition, using a recipe.

Finally, she planned an Autumn Brunch as part of learning new language skills. On the day of the Brunch, each student brought a cooked dish from their country of origin and a card listing its main ingredients and presented these to the class. A student collected and played music from each country. Marjorie says, "The brunch was fun, funny, filled with laughter and joking, connecting, and bonding." Students enjoyed the foods from other countries and loved sharing their traditions. Most important, they learned many new words.

This cultural and language exchange led to the idea of creating a cookbook comprised of recipes from the students' countries of origin. Cookbooks and writing down recipes were not traditionally used in their families. In the homemade Autumn Brunch Cookbook each recipe is introduced with a description of its cultural significance, and each recipe contains ingredients and amounts, preparation instructions, and a photo, common elements in cookbook formats. Measurements in most countries used the metric system and had to be converted to the U.S. system.

Recipes students contributed to the cookbook include banana fofou (an African flour), biryani (chicken, rice, spices and herbs), gari-kanya (made from cassava), ginger juice, pumpkin soup, spring roll, Tchep rice and fish, wat (stew with meat, vegetables, and spices), shiro (made with chickpeas), enjera (flat spongy bread), green coffee, himbasha (bread), and fried kapeek (with pork, peanut, garlic hot chili, and oyster sauce.) Ingredients for these dishes can be found in neighborhood ethnic stores.

As a follow-up, Marjorie created a multiple choice quiz using names of foods, countries, celebrations, and instructional words, as a reading comprehension activity and a tool for students to learn how to find information in the cookbook. Review of the questions and answers provided opportunities for speaking, listening, and learning.

Here are examples of questions:

- In which countries is the spice Garam Masala commonly used to season food? (Answer: India and Pakistan.)
- The instructions for recipes usually begin with a verb. Circle the word in each list which is NOT a verb. (Answers: medium, pieces, stalks, seasonings.)

Students took the quiz to help them remember the foods and the words they learned through the cookbook and their Autumn Brunch.