

Module 5 - How to Teach Vocabulary

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I. The characteristics of a word

This module is about words and their meaning. Understanding the meaning of words will allow your students to communicate their ideas. It is possible to convey meaning even without being aware of verb structures and other grammatical rules. For example, "My book where is?" and "You like we go now?"

It is up to you to encourage your students to communicate regardless of their ability, as your students can make pronunciation mistakes and still be understood.

When a student learns a new word or group of words, they need to focus on certain characteristics concerning it.

Meaning

What is the meaning of the word, or group of words? What does it refer to, and how is it being used?

Form

What form does the word take? I.e is it a noun (sensitivity), an adjective (sensitive) or an adverb (sensitively)?

Pronunciation

How do I physically say the word?

Stress

How many syllables are there, and where is the stress?

For example, the word 'delegate' has 3 syllables and the first syllable is stressed.

Spelling

How do I spell it? Are there any rules or guidance relating to the spelling – or some tricks to help remember it?

Style

Is the style formal or informal?

Collocations

How does the word combine with other words? For example, 'To do work', or 'to make a bed'.

II. Teaching new words

1. Some tips for teaching words

Learning new vocabulary is a crucial part of learning a new language, but students can often feel barraged by the sheer volume of the language. To help them alleviate the pressure of learning a lot of new words, always try to put new words in context and give students plenty of opportunity to practise. Avoid too many intimidating tests or expecting students to learn from lists of random words.

Give your students plenty of opportunity to practise new vocabulary in useful and realistic contexts. Try using visual organisers, such as pictures, charts or mindmaps, which your students fill in, or use a linguistic context, such as a reading text, a listening text, a song, a poem or a video, in order to recycle the new vocabulary.

Avoid long, unrelated lists of words, but encourage your students to keep their own vocabulary lists of related words. This is especially important at lower levels.

Remember that single words often have more than one meaning, for example 'pool', 'bottom', 'catch', and there are lots of common idioms and collocations such as 'under the weather', 'bump into' and 'cut off', where meanings cannot be deduced from the individual words.

Include in your lesson plans how you intend to present vocabulary to beginner and elementary students who don't have enough vocabulary to understand definitions. You will find out more about lesson plans in Module 11.

The three most common ways of processing words are visually, aurally and kinaesthetically (through movement). Most people use a combination of all three. For this reason it's helpful for learners to hear, see and relate words to memorable contexts.

There is no right and wrong way to teach vocabulary, but there are certain ways that provide consistently good results. There are a number of ways you can present words, but the key is to do so quickly and memorably.

2. Some techniques of teaching words

Here are some techniques to consider:

- Bring in realia (real objects)
- Mime it
- Draw a picture
- Show a flash card
- Make a sound
- Use a synonym (a similar word)
- Use an antonym (an opposite word)
- Put the word in a sentence, e.g. 'You drive to work in a ...'
- Define it - explain the word in English - remember to avoid language that is more complicated than the word you are trying to explain. Avoid complex grammar and keep your sentences short
- Encourage students to use a monolingual dictionary
- Explain the word in the students' language (or ask them to look it up in their bilingual dictionary).

3. Examples of how to teach words

For example, here is how the word 'frightened' can be explained:

Teacher: "How do I look?"

Student 1: "Cold - very cold!"

Student 2: "You are angry"

Teacher: "Look at my eyes" (she points to her wide eyes and pretends to cower).

Student 2: "You are afraid"

Teacher : "Yes – good! When am I afraid"?

Student 4: "When you hear big noise in the dark!"

For words like 'window' you could point to a real one.

For generic words such as 'animal', you can compare various types, so that students understand it is a general word. Brainstorming is good for this.

4. Segmenting words

You can also try explaining the meaning of a word using language that is less complex than the word itself. In doing so, you will segment the meaning of the word into its component parts and make it easier to understand.

For example, here are some ways to describe the word 'poster':

- It has a big picture or an advertisement.
- It's made of paper.
- You can put it on a wall in your house.
- You can see very big ones on buildings or beside the road.
- Many advertise cars, beer, cigarettes, airlines, Coca-Cola, etc.

5. Concept questions

In order to check that your students fully understand the concept of a word, consider asking concept check questions. Here is an example:

Teacher: "What am I doing?" (she mimes the action of hitch-hiking). "I'm hitch-hiking. Look, a car stops and I get in." (pretends to get in).

Now that the teacher has explained the act, she can ask concept check questions, and open discussion if she chooses to.

Teacher: "Do I know the driver?"

Class: "No."

Teacher: "Does it cost anything?"

Class: "No."

Teacher: "Why do people hitch-hike?"

Class: "To save money/to get to places."

Teacher: "Is it safe?"

And so on...

6. Six steps to success – the sequence of teaching vocabulary

If you are presenting a new word, or group of words to your class, consider using the following method.

1. Present : Present the word using an appropriate technique, e.g. picture, mime, etc.
2. Elicit . Elicit the word (extract the information from your students – don't just tell them).
3. Feed : If students don't know the word, feed it to them.
4. Concept check : Check that all the students understand so far by asking concept check questions.
5. Drill : Drill the class after you have repeated the word/s a few times. (Ask them to repeat the word over – both chorally, i.e. all together, and individually).
6. Write : Write the word on the board and highlight the grammar and pronunciation.

III. Ideas for vocabulary lessons

1. Additional vocabulary activities

Always try to think of new ways to teach vocabulary to your students, taking into account that what works for one class may not work for another. Your students will enjoy some variety, as well as a few regular and familiar methods. Consider the following activities:

a) **Brainstorming**

Write the key word in the middle of the board and write new vocabulary around it. You can use this as a 'warmer'.

b) **Underlining**

After a reading comprehension activity, ask students to underline, for example, 10 words, or 5 nouns or 6 adjectives, etc, that they know in the reading passage (other than those taught before the reading). Then in pairs and small groups, they check the results – if a group member doesn't know a word, the person/people who have underlined it explain the meaning to them.

c) **Mix and match**

Match unfamiliar words from one column with definitions from another column. The new / unfamiliar words are numbered in column one, and the definitions are mixed up and lettered in column two.

d) **Memory cards**

Maintain a card system and rotate the cards so that unfamiliar words are constantly reviewed. Each card can include collocations, antonyms, different grammatical forms and meanings. Sentences on the card can illustrate when meanings differ according to the context.

There are plenty of games aimed at helping you practise vocabulary with your class. You will find more details about these games in Module 12, but here is an overview:

2. Vocabulary games

Memory games

One good memory game is called 'In my suitcase'.

Students sit in a circle and the teacher 'puts something in the suitcase' beginning with A (avocado). Then the student to her left says "avocado, book". The next student continues "avocado, book, car", etc.

Alternatively you can play Pairs or Pelmanism. Create a series of pairs of cards – one with a picture and one with a word. The students mix up the cards and then put them face down on the table. They take it in turns to turn over two cards. Student A turns over two cards. If the card has a word the student should read it. If the card has a picture the students should say the name. If the picture and word match then the student keeps the pair and gets another turn. If the cards don't match then they are turned face down again and then next student has a go. When there are no cards left the students should count their pairs. The student with the most pairs wins.

Affixation

Using prefixes and suffixes to make new words. Affixation games work well in groups so the students can support each other. You can give the students a root, such as happy, and then have the students brainstorm all the words they can make with that root, for example: unhappy, happiness, happily, unhappily, happier, etc.

Want to make the game more exciting? Just set a time limit.

Gap fill exercises

This means selecting appropriate words to insert in sentences. Many students think that this is too difficult for beginners or for children but you should be able to adapt it if you ensure you use familiar language and provide clear context. Don't include too many spaces as it makes the task harder.

For children you can put pictures in the gaps to help them.

Consider using multiple choice options to help students consider similar words. (This activity is frequently used on international exams so it's a good one to use in class.) You can use this activity at sentence level or at paragraph level. The bigger the text the more context you give the students and the easier it should be to do.

Matching word games

Match the beginnings and the ends of words together like dominoes. This is a great task that helps with spelling and can be linked with affixation. It helps students to recognize syllables in English too. It can also be used to work on compound words, for example grand/mother or foot/ball.

Matching pictures to words can be good for beginners or young learners. Use either a worksheet or cards. If you create the worksheet list the vocabulary on the left and the pictures on the right. They should not be in the correct order. Students then match the pictures and the words.

Antonyms and anagrams

Learning vocabulary in pairs can help students memorise the words, for example: black and white / beautiful and ugly. You can then use these words for other activities, such as matching tasks or an antonym dictation. (The teacher dictates small and the students write small + an antonym, e.g. big.)

Anagrams are a great filler and can be done on the board to review vocabulary you've been working with. For example, if you've been working on the family you could write the following: throem (mother) or sno (son).

Word searches

Students have to find a specific number of words in a square of letters. You can give the students the words they must look for or just tell them how many words they are looking for and the subject.

They are also easy to make. Use squared paper and mark out a large square of 10 by 10. Write in the words you want your students to find. They can be horizontal, vertical or diagonal. Copy this part so you know what the answers are. Then fill in the blank squares with random letters. You're ready!

Hangman

Choose a word that the students already know and write dashes on the board representing each letter. Students take turns at guessing a letter. If the word contains the letter, replace the dash with it. If not, draw in a section of the scaffold.

The students win if they guess the word before they are hanged. Note that if the hanging part seems inappropriate, variations could be a clock counting down to midnight, or draw steps down to the ocean. (The idea is not to get your feet wet!) Children like to have sharks in the water so they have to avoid being eaten!

I-Spy

This is a guessing game. Look around the classroom and decide what object to "spy", for example, clock. Say "I spy with my little eye something beginning with C." The students then take it in turn to guess what it is.