TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING VOCABULARY

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Annotation

This article is devoted to the teaching and learning techniques of the vocabulary and how to use at the lessons and designing some different activities in teaching vocabulary.

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Introduction

We know how important vocabulary is in respect to learning a language, but how do we go about teaching and learning it? In this article we take a look at a number of techniques designed to help teach and learn vocabulary.

In the title of this article I have separated teaching and learning – why? Well, when it comes to vocabulary I think that some activities are designed for presenting and practising vocabulary, while other activities are designed to help students record and activate vocabulary. Of course, it's not a clear divide and many activities cover both areas, but I do think it is an important distinction to make.

Therefore, I am going to divide this article into two broad sections: the first looking at different techniques and activities designed to teach vocabulary, both new and old (or familiar); and techniques and activities that focus on learning vocabulary. These later techniques and activities do need to be introduced (or taught) to the students, but once they have mastered them, they can be used independently of the teacher.

Techniques for teaching vocabulary

In this section we'll look at various techniques for presenting and, to a lesser degree, practising vocabulary. It is important to realize that a good teacher will not rely on just one of these techniques, but will use a combination. Different techniques are appropriate for different vocabulary items and also for different types of learner. As you read through the different techniques, try to think what words would be best taught using the technique and for which words the technique would probably not work very well. [Courtright, M & Wesolek, C; 2000]

Visuals and Realia

One of the most effective ways of teaching vocabulary is to show students the word. Concrete words (mostly nouns) can usually be conveyed through pictures or realia

(real objects). For example, a word like *chair* (as a noun) is quite easy to teach, by pointing to a chair or by showing a picture. Likewise, related words such as *stool, armchair, sofa, deckchair,* etc can be taught in a similar way and the distinction between each made relatively clear. Even some abstract words can often be conveyed using visuals – for example, a picture of a man and woman plus a heart could be used to convey the word *love*.

Mime and Anecdotes

Visuals and realia are usually limited to concrete words and are probably ineffectual when it comes to more abstract notions and even some basic areas of vocabulary such as verbs, adverbs and adjectives. However, these three areas of vocabulary do lend themselves to mime and anecdotes.

It is relatively easy to mime words such as *run* and *walk* and even to differentiate between words that belong to the same group but have quite fundamental differences in meaning, e.g. *run, walk, stroll, sprint, jog, wander,* etc. It is also relatively easy to use mime to teach adverbs of manner, i.e. *quickly, slowly, happily,* etc. Getting students to mime various actions in a particular manner is great fun and a good way of making the adverbs memorable.

Another way of presenting vocabulary is to tell a short anecdote containing the new words. This gives the words a context and helps students understand not only the core meaning, but also how the words might be used. It's also quite simple to recycle the words within an anecdote so that students hear the same word more than once. The more times students hear a word, the more likely they are to remember it. Repetition is quite natural in anecdotes and so does not seem out of place.

Eliciting and Contexts

Eliciting words from students is an effective way of activating their memories. In a class of students it is quite possible that one or two may have come across the word before, even with low levels. It also helps you find out how much your students already know. There are a few different techniques for eliciting vocabulary, from drawing a quick picture on the board to giving an explanation or a short example of vocabulary that the language you use is simpler than the language you are trying to elicit.

Giving the context for a word, just like embedding the word in an anecdote, helps students see how a particular item of vocabulary might be used. It also makes the word more memorable, helping students learn the item. Even if you are unable to elicit a word from your students, when you eventually tell them the word you were trying to elicit it is far more likely that they will remember it and its meaning.

Using Synonyms and Antonyms

A technique often used by teachers, especially at low levels, is to explain words by using a synonym or antonym. In many respects this is a flawed idea. Firstly, because many of the words will be of a similar level and, if a student doesn't know one, then they won't know the other, i.e. if a teacher wants to elicit *black* and they say it's the opposite of *white* then this is unlikely to be helpful as the students probably don't know *white*. Secondly, it can be very misleading as very few words have a direct antonym. For example, what's the opposite of *old*? Is it *new* or *young*? Both, but then that becomes confusing. Thirdly, many words have more than one antonym or synonym all with similar meanings, so which do you use? For example, the opposite of *happy* could be *sad* or *unhappy*, it often depends on the context.

Having said this, using antonyms and synonyms to help elicit words can sometimes be useful, as long as it's thought through carefully. Synonyms and antonyms can also be extremely useful as a framework for recording and remembering vocabulary (we'll look more at this in the section on learning vocabulary).

Translation

Translation is another technique that has pros and cons. Many teachers and teacher trainers see translation as a bad thing. They seem to feel that translation will in some way prevent the student from ever becoming proficient in the target language. This is quite obviously not true. There are many cases of learners becoming quite good in a language despite relying heavily on translation. In some instances translation is clearly advantageous. Where a group of students share the same mother tongue (and in particular where the teacher does too) it makes sense to make use of this facility from time to time. In fact, translation can often save time and help with comprehension. Many students use translation when they are recording the new vocabulary, whether the teacher likes it or not.

However, it is important to make students aware of some of the shortcomings of translation. It is often the case that there aren't any direct translations (word for word equivalents), or that one language might have more than one way of saying something, depending on the context. Making students aware of these problems, rather than completely avoiding translation, may well help their learning. Students can easily become over-reliant on the teacher to translate everything so translation should only be used as one of many techniques employed in teaching vocabulary.

Dictionaries

Giving your students strategies for learning is an important part of teaching. When you consider the amount of time your students will spend outside the classroom, it is obviously essential that you help them to become independent learners. One of the

best, and probably easiest, ways of learning about new words is by using a dictionary (especially a good monolingual dictionary such as the Macmillan Dictionary.

Encouraging your students to use a dictionary in the classroom when reading a text, for example, will be extremely useful for them. A nice dictionary activity to develop vocabulary is to get your students to find a word they have recently learnt and read the definition, then to choose a word from the definition they either don't really understand, or that they think is key, and then to look this word up and read the definition. Working in pairs and noting down the 'route' and the definitions they take can lead to an extremely productive period of learning new vocabulary and thinking about meanings.

Techniques for learning vocabulary

Once vocabulary has been presented (and often before it is practised), students will need to start learning it. Practising and using the vocabulary is part of the learning process but students usually need time to process a vocabulary item too. The first stage is to find ways of recording the various aspects of the word (see previous article – What do words mean? to get an idea of the complex nature of *knowing* a word). Storing a word somewhere that can be accessed easily, or keeping it in mind, is essential. Even our mental filing cabinets (our brains) need to have a system by which they store and retrieve things. Helping our students develop a system that they can use is a must. The second stage is helping our students to be able to retrieve these items, not just as a set of letters, but as a meaningful piece of language. Here are some ideas:

Ways of recording

Vocabulary item	Grammar	Pronunciation	Meaning (Definition / Picture)
Cat	Noun	/kæt/	
Example	**Collocations**	**Translation**	**Other (i.e. word family, synonyms, antonyms)**
Tom has got two cats and a dog.	-	Macska	Kitten – a young cat. Wild cats – lion, tiger, etc

There are many ways of recording vocabulary and your students need to find a way that suits them. However, it is a good idea to show students what you think they could record about a word and how they might go about it. The simplest way is probably to use a kind of chart which could include the following: [Maclean. I; 2000.]

Using a picture to help you remember the expression – although the meaning is not

Vocabulary item	Grammar	Meaning	Example	Translation	Picture / Clue
To let the cat out of the bag.	Idiom	To tell someone something that was meant to be a secret.	He really let the cat out of the bag when he told Jack that Mary was getting married.	Kiugratni a nyulat a bokorbol (Word for word this means *To make the rabbit jump out of the bush*.)	Possibly a cat jumping out of a bag or someone whispering to another person.

literal – is quite useful.

**Making Connections**
Recording vocabulary is an important step in remembering it and being able to turn passive knowledge into something active. However, in order to activate vocabulary, students need to be able to retrieve it and remember the meaning and how it's used in a sentence. To do this we often make connections; these connections help us recall the word, its meaning and how it's used. Here are three ways we can do this:
1. Key words and pictures. This is a technique that some people have claimed helps to fix the word and its meaning in the memory. The technique is based on making a mental image that connects the new word in the L2 with a word in the students L1 that has some association (often sound) with the L2 word. For example, when I want to remember how to say 'I love you' in Chinese I connect the Chinese words that make up the phrase with three words/pictures in English – *wall, eye* and *knee*. When I put these English words together I can make the phrase for 'I love you' in Chinese! If you can't think of a key word, then often a simple picture will help remind you of a word and its meaning.
2. Groups, scales and spider grams. Putting words into groups of related vocabulary items is another good technique. Groups might consist of hyponyms, such as *father, mother, sister, son, cousin, aunt, grandfather*; grammar sets, such as

adjectives and adverbs; or root words and derivatives, such as *comfort, discomfort, comfortable, uncomfortable*. Another way of grouping words is in the form of a scale. This is a common way for things like adverbs of frequency to be presented in many books, for example, *always, usually, often, sometimes, hardly ever, never*. It's also useful for sets of adjectives that can be presented on a scale from one extreme to the other, i.e. *boiling, hot, warm, cool, cold, freezing*. Finally, using a spidergram can be extremely useful as it enables you to add more words later on. A spidergram for *sport* might look like this:
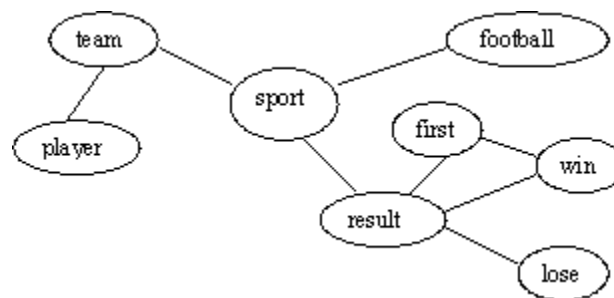
3. Synonyms and antonyms

Using synonyms and antonyms is another way of grouping words. It can also be very useful to record synonyms together so that when you are writing or speaking you are able to use a variety of language and not just the same word again and again. There is a tendency for some words to be overused in English. A good example of this is the word *nice*, which is used to describe so many things that it has become almost bland and non-committal.[Diamont;2007]

In sum up these ideas are in no way exhaustive. Some of the techniques and activities I use more frequently than others and some I don't use at all – mostly because I do not think they are appropriate for my style of teaching or my students' needs. Finding the best ways to teach and learn vocabulary with your students is one of the most important things as a teacher you can do, and having a range of techniques and activities aids this process.

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