20 tips on teaching vocabulary

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Connecting Teachers

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Better Learning

What do you think about teaching vocabulary?

- How important is it?

- How many times do you need to review new items?

- American or British vocabulary?

- Guessing from context?

- … etc.

Vocabulary-teaching ideas

Mostly to add to, rather than replace, what you are doing already

Tip #1: Spend a lot of class time vocabulary teaching

Because:

1. Sheer amount the students need to learn

2. They don't usually just 'pick it up'

Amount

Research:

- You need to know about 3000 words at intermediate (B1) level

- 5000 words at advanced (B2)

- At least 8000 for academic studies

Which means

Teaching a lot of vocabulary in lessons…

… and reviewing it

Students don't just 'pick it up

Learning new vocabulary from extensive reading is slow

- How much do your students read?
- In their own language? In English?

Tip #2: Review again and again

Research indicates we need to encounter a word 6-16 times in order to remember it...

... So recycle as many times as you can

Useful routines

- Remind students at the end of the lesson of vocabulary they learned earlier. (Display on the screen)

- Start the next lesson by asking them to recall. (Challenge to write into the chat box)

Tip #3: teach multi-word items, not just single words

'Phrases'

'Lexical phrases'

'Chunks'

'Lexical chunks'

'Expressions'

… etc.

About 10% of the vocabulary students need to know

Most could not be guessed by knowing the single words

- *of course*
- *by the way*
- *by and large*
- *now and then*

- *look after*
- *get on with*
- *willy-nilly*
- *out and about*

Tip # 4: Teach a new word + what it goes with

- *angry + with; afraid + of*
- *tall* + person but *high* + mountain
- *fast* + food, runner, *quick* + review, visit, question
- sleep *soundly,* work *hard*
- *dead right* but not **dead correct*

Tip #5: Prioritize international vocabulary

The distinction between British and American doesn't matter so much...

What matters is:

Will this word/expression be understood by other people using English as an international language?

Which would you teach?

- fortnight / two weeks
- billfold / wallet
- fall / autumn
- program / programme
- she just finished / she has just finished
- Do you have..? / Have you got..?
- It's here, isn't it? / It's here, no? / It's here, right?

A useful tool: Corpus of global web-based English (GloWbe)

https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/

Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE)

SEARCH | **CHART** | CONTEXT | LOG IN

CHANGE TO VERTICAL CHART / CLICK TO SEE CONTEXT

SECTION	ALL	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
FREQ	81	41	7	5	4	3	1	0	0	2	2	0	1	2	5	2	1	1	0	0	4
WORDS (M)	1900	386.8	134.8	387.6	101.0	148.2	81.4	96.4	46.6	51.4	39.5	43.0	41.6	43.2	40.5	45.4	42.6	38.8	41.1	35.2	39.6
PER MIL	0.04	0.11	0.05	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.00	0.02	0.05	0.12	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.00	0.00	0.10

findings for *billfold*

Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE)

SEARCH | **CHART** | CONTEXT | LOG IN

CHANGE TO VERTICAL CHART / CLICK TO SEE CONTEXT

SECTION	ALL	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
FREQ	13799	3126	1039	2484	511	1145	513	751	166	199	302	496	480	468	383	405	314	365	282	175	195
WORDS (M)	1900	386.8	134.8	387.6	101.0	148.2	81.4	96.4	46.6	51.4	39.5	43.0	41.6	43.2	40.5	45.4	42.6	38.8	41.1	35.2	39.6
PER MIL	7.26	8.08	7.71	6.41	5.06	7.73	6.30	7.79	3.56	3.87	7.65	11.54	11.53	10.82	9.47	8.93	7.36	9.41	6.87	4.98	4.93

findings for *wallet*

SEARCH | CHART | CONTEXT | TEXTS

CHANGE TO VERTICAL CHART / CLICK TO SEE CONTEXT

SECTION	ALL	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
FREQ	39151	8851	3113	7168	1745	3610	1989	1806	684	765	685	947	859	970	950	973	1123	772	757	589	795
WORDS (M)	1900	386.8	134.8	387.6	101.0	148.2	81.4	96.4	46.6	51.4	39.5	43.0	41.6	43.2	40.5	45.4	42.6	38.8	41.1	35.2	39.6
PER MIL	20.61	22.88	23.10	18.49	17.27	24.36	24.44	18.73	14.68	14.89	17.35	22.04	20.63	22.43	23.49	21.45	26.33	19.91	18.44	16.75	20.09

Do you have

SEARCH | CHART | CONTEXT | TEXTS

CHANGE TO VERTICAL CHART / CLICK TO SEE CONTEXT

SECTION	ALL	US	CA	GB	IE	AU	NZ	IN	LK	PK	BD	SG	MY	PH	HK	ZA	NG	GH	KE	TZ	JM
FREQ	3079	287	73	1210	232	411	193	151	78	38	28	32	48	60	59	56	33	27	16	31	16
WORDS (M)	1900	386.8	134.8	387.6	101.0	148.2	81.4	96.4	46.6	51.4	39.5	43.0	41.6	43.2	40.5	45.4	42.6	38.8	41.1	35.2	39.6
PER MIL	1.62	0.74	0.54	3.12	2.30	2.77	2.37	1.57	1.67	0.74	0.71	0.74	1.15	1.39	1.46	1.23	0.77	0.70	0.39	0.88	0.40

Have you got

Tip #6: Reading texts: You don't always have to pre-teach vocabulary

- If you teach 10-12 new words immediately before reading a new text …

- Students probably won't remember what they mean when they encounter them.

- Some evidence that teaching vocabulary **after**, rather than **before**, encountering it in a text brings about better learning.

So if you pre-teach:

- Only a few key items
- In a previous lesson
- Leave time to review them before reading.

It's fine to teach the new items as they come up

Meaningful context

Immediately contribute to text comprehension

- **+ review later**

Tip # 7: Don't usually ask students to guess words from context

In most cases – they get it wrong.

- frustration
- failure
- no learning
- time-wasting

Recycling clothes

While most clothes with care will last many years, changing fashions mean their lifespan is artificially shortened by consumers changing tastes. (1)………. figures suggest modern clothing will have a lifespan of between 2-10 years – with underwear and t-shirts lasting just one to two years, while suits and coats last for around four to six years.

Would (2)………… our clothes help to reduce the toll our fashion addiction has on the environment?

Currently just 13.6% of clothes and shoes thrown away in the US end up being recycled – while the average American throws away 37 kg. of clothes every year. (3)………… just 12% of the material used for clothing ends up being recycled. Compare that to paper, class and plastic PET bottles – which have recycling rates of 66%, 27% and 29% (4).............. in the US – and it is clear clothing lags behind.

Indeed, most of the recycled polyester being used now by leading fashion brands in fact comes from (5)…………….. rather than old clothing.

While most clothes with care will last many years, changing fashions mean their lifespan is artificially shortened by consumers changing tastes. **Industry** figures suggest modern clothing will have a lifespan of between 2-10 years – with underwear and t-shirts lasting just one to two years, while suits and coats last for around four to six years.

Would **recycling** our clothes help to reduce the toll our fashion addiction has on the environment?

Currently just 13.6% of clothes and shoes thrown away in the US end up being recycled – while the average American throws away 37 kg. of clothes every year. **Globally** just 12% of the material used for clothing ends up being recycled. Compare that to paper, class and plastic PET bottles – which have recycling rates of 66%, 27% and 29% **respectively** in the US – and it is clear clothing lags behind.

Indeed, most of the recycled polyester being used now by leading fashion brands in fact comes from **bottles** rather than old clothing.

Conclusion

- Guessing from context is not usually very useful.

- Ask students to guess only if you are fairly sure they can do so successfully.

- Otherwise: just tell them what the words mean!

- Use your cursor or highlight to direct their attention to the word you are explaining

Tip #8: Use online profilers to help you decide which vocabulary to teach from a text

Prioritize the common vocabulary from your text.

How do you know which are most common?

1. Your own professional judgement
2. Vocabulary profilers

Corpus-based online tools

- **Lextutor**

https://www.lextutor.ca/vp/comp/

By thousand words in a frequency list (K1 etc.)

- **Text Inspector**

http://englishprofile.org/wordlists/text-inspector

CEFR (A1, A2 etc.)

- **Wordandphrase**

https://www.wordandphrase.info/analyzeText.asp

By thousand words in a frequency list (K1 etc.)

Compleat Web VP v.2.1 NEW! million-word VPs (@ bottom)

Profile any text with *nine* list frameworks in *two* languages at *two* grain-sizes at *one* interface

Note that BNL, Coca-Core, CEFR, and Classic AWL are not *full* 1000-family lists (see [?] details) and that NGSL and French are Lemmas not Families

How to make list framework comparisons? Demo 8 here
Lex Frequency predicts Text Complexity? Check these
Try VP Average-Level-sorted concordances. Easiest contexts first, check this

📱 VP-1 🤖 VP-Basic 📱

FRAMEWORKS

- ⦿ BNC-COCA 1-25k - [?] Lists
  - > ○ BNC-COCA 1-25 "c-series" (100 heads) [?] Lists
- ○ CLASSIC (GSL/AWL) [?] Lists
- ⦿ BNC 1-20k [⦿Fams ○Lems (15k)] [?] Lists
- ○ BNC-COCA Core-4 [?] Lists
- NGSL + ○ NAWL OR + ⦿ TOEIC OR + ○ BIZ [?] Lists
- ○ CEFR - English [?] Lists
- ⦿ BNL [?] Lists
- ○ FRENCH v.5, 1-25k [?] Lists

Input mode A Type or paste small to medium size text (max about 15,000 words) into window, choose options, and click yellow *Submit_window* button for Lexical Frequency Profile.

Title: Untitled |+| Eng+**Fr**! Cognates ☐ (Lists) |+| Sentence Count ☐ |+| Bar Chart ☐ |+| Coca Count-Index/List ☐ ? |+| Basic ☐ ?

INSTRUCTIONS: Type or paste your text here and click the yellow SUBMIT_window button. VocabProfile will tell you how many words the text contains from frequency bands as determined by analysing research corpora. For a demonstration, enter this text, or one of the sample texts below.

TEXT SET-UP
General: Include an empty space after every comma or full stop.
Research: Deal with spelling errors and proper nouns.

Demos: Isogram | Lit (1) (2) | Graded (1) (2) | Science (1) (2) | News (NYT) (WP) | Speech Adults Kids | Rex Murphy | Legal | GSL+AWL 1k 2K AWL | French   Highlight   Count

RECAT

Words to recategorize => 1k (type or dbl-click)
(E.g. known cognates/compounds)

☐ <Select

PROPER NOUN HANDLING ?
Off-list mid-sentence caps...

- Leave as offlist * ○
- Class as 1k/1c * ⦿
- Eliminate * ○

COMPOUNDS HANDLING ?
When Off word is 2 wds...

- Class as offlist * ○
- Break apart * ⦿
Texts to 2.5k; BNC-Coca

Plus propers at sentence boundary => 1k
(E.g., "._Paul Martin")

☐ <Select

SUBMIT_window

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How to make list framework comparisons? Demo 8 here
Lex Frequency predicts Text Complexity? Check these
Try VP Average-Level-sorted concordances. Easiest contexts first, check this

VP-1 VP-Basic

W O R K S →

NGSL + ◯ NAWL OR + ◯ TOEIC OR + ◯ BIZ   [?] Lists

◯ CEFR - English   [?] Lists

◯ BNL   [?] Lists

◯ FRENCH v.5, 1-25k   [?] Lists

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Title: Untitled |+| Eng+Fr! Cognates ☐ (Lists) |+| Sentence Count ☐ |+| Bar Chart ☐ |+| Coca Count-Index/List ☐ ? |+| Basic ☐ ?

While most clothes with care will last many years, changing fashions mean their lifespan is artificially shortened by consumers changing tastes. Industry figures suggest modern clothing will have a lifespan of between 2-10 years – with underwear and t-shirts lasting just one to two years, while suits and coats last for around four to six years.
Would recycling our clothes help to reduce the toll our fashion addiction has on the environment?
Currently just 13.6% of clothes and shoes thrown away in the US end up being recycled – while the average American throws away 37 kg. of clothes every year. Globally just 12% of the material used for clothing ends up being recycled. Compare that to paper, class and plastic PET bottles – which have recycling rates of 66%, 27% and 29% respectively in the US – and it is clear clothing lags behind. Indeed, most of the recycled polyester being used now by leading fashion brands in fact comes from bottles rather than old clothing.

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K-1	136	80.0
K-2	15	88.8
K-3	4	91.2
K-4	9	96.5
K-5	2	97.7
K-8	1	98.3
OFF	0	≈100

REPEATED 2+ K-Families
to remove with care
when simplifying
to lower K or C level [?]

shion

cycle
pan

+ UNREPEATED

UNREPEATED 2k+
gletons (Fams) to
te:

while most clothes with care will last many years changing fashions mean their life span is artificially shortened by consumers changing tastes industry figures suggest modern clothing will have a life span of between number years with under wear and shirts lasting just one to two years while suits and coats last for around four to six years would recycling our clothes help to reduce the toll our fashion addiction has on the environment currently just number number of clothes and shoes thrown away in the us end up being recycled while the average american throws away number kg of clothes every year globally just number of the material used for clothing ends up being recycled compare that to paper class and plastic pet bottles which have recycling rates of number number and number respectively in the us and it is clear clothing lags behind indeed most of the recycled polyester being used now by leading fashion brands in fact comes from bottles rather than old clothing

Tip #9: It's OK to practice words out of context (as well as in…)

You don't always have to contextualize in full sentences.

Single-word review is also useful.

Or brief phrases

Single-word review

- Recalling (chat box)
- Translations (pencil and paper)
- Dictation (pencil and paper)
- Odd one out (pencil and paper)
- 'Yes/no' (annotating or poll)

Words in phrases

What adjectives could you apply to the word *question*? (chat box)

How many phrases can you think of using the word *under*? (chat box)

Tip #10: Make exercises interesting

There are simple strategies which can make vocabulary exercises more interesting.

For example….

Original exercise

tree   apartment   bicycle   ice cream

1. Mary likes eating _____

2. The boy is riding a _____

3. The family lives in this _____

4. There is an apple on the _____

Strategy 1: Delete the word bank

~~tree   apartment   bicycle   ice cream~~

1. Mary likes eating _____
2. The boy is riding a _____
3. The family lives in this _____
4. There is an apple on the _____

1. Mary likes eating _____
2. The boy is riding a _____
3. The family lives in this _____
4. There is an apple on the _____

Strategy 2:
Delete part of the 'root' sentence

~~tree~~   ~~apartment~~   ~~bicycle~~   ~~ice cream~~

1. Mary ~~likes eating~~ ice cream

2. The boy ~~is riding~~ a bicycle

3. The family ~~lives in this~~ apartment

4. There is ~~an apple on~~ the tree

1. Mary _____ice cream
2. The boy _____ a bicycle
3. The family _____ apartment
4. There is _____ the tree

Strategy 3: Personalize

tree   apartment   bicycle   ice cream

1.   I… ~~Mary likes eating~~ … ice cream
2.   I… ~~The boy is riding~~ … a bicycle
3.   I… ~~The family lives in this~~ … apartment
4.   I… ~~There is an apple on~~ … the tree

1. I_____ ice cream

2. I _____ a bicycle

3. I _____ apartment

4. I _____ the tree

Strategy 4: Extend

tree   apartment   bicycle   ice cream

1. Mary likes eating ice cream when ….
2. The boy is riding a bicycle because …
3. The family lives in this apartment but …
4. There is an apple on the tree and…

What makes exercises more interesting?

- Open-ended responses
  - Creativity, humour
    - Unpredictability

- Higher-order thinking
  - Personalization

Tip 11: Avoid word games like 'Hangman' and 'Wordsearch'

They're mainly a waste of time for vocabulary learning.

More time spent searching or wrong guesses than finding:

(Useful as time-fillers)

Tip #12: Use L1 (as well)

- When introducing the meaning of a new vocabulary item

How to present meaning:

- Picture?
- Realia?
- Mime?
- Synonym?
- Explanation?
- Examples?
- Context?
- Translation?

Picture

Impact

BUT

may be ambiguous

not all items can be depicted

Happy

Realia and mime

Probably more impact than a picture

BUT

May be ambiguous

Not all items can be presented by realia or mime

Synonym

Quick

BUT

Only at higher levels

May be inaccurate or rough

Explanation

For higher levels

Added exposure to English.

BUT:

time? clarity?

e.g.

Disappointed: If you are disappointed you are sad because something has not happened or because something is not as good as you had hoped.

Examples

Can explain some general terms

E.g. sweet: apples, sugar, honey …

sports: football, tennis, basketball, swimming

BUT

Not everything is easily explained by examples

Use in context

Adds knowledge of sentence-context

More exposure to English

BUT

Often does not clarify the meaning

exact:

1. *They knew the _____ answer.*
2. *Please be more _____!*
3. *I need to know the _____ price.*

Translation

- Usually accurate
  - Quick
  - Natural

Bottom line:

Use pictures, explanation etc…

… with a quick translation as backup.

(And DON'T feel guilty about it!)

Tip #13: Don't teach lexical sets all together for the first time

e.g. colors, parts of the body, prepositions, action verbs

Some evidence that they aren't learnt very well.

Interference theory

Better to teach items that will naturally co-occur in a given context

NOT blue + red,yellow, green

BUT RATHER: blue + sky

NOT: mother, father, daughter, son, uncle, aunt, cousin …

BUT RATHER: mother, father, home, together, love, take care of, family, baby …

Tip 14: Don't spend ages checking homework exercises in class

If they've done a vocabulary exercise at home…

… Don't (usually) go through the entire exercise again in class

(and certainly not online!)

Better:

Provide the answers on the screen, they self-check.

Or:

(In break-out rooms) Check each other in pairs or threes.

Call to ask you if they aren't sure ('ask for help', then 'invite host')

Best

(if you have time)

Take in notebooks and check at home.

(They send you homework by email or school website, you check digitally and send back)

Tip 15: Get students to present new vocabulary

- 'Word of the day'
- 'Phrase of the day'

(But make sure you have a reserve …)

(students share screen)

Tip 16: Get students to design test items

If you want to test all the vocabulary we've learnt over the last month (term? six weeks?...)

Get students to design questions (in pairs in class? For homework? Both?)

Take them in, correct if necessary and design the test based on them.

Send it to them by email attachment, they do it at home and send back to you

Advantages

- The test preparation is itself review
- Lowers test anxiety
- The students 'own' the test

Tip # 17: Make online lessons as interactive as you can

In general: face to face is better!

If online: make interactive

- Microphones and cameras
- Chat box
- 'Breakout rooms'
- Polls

Tip # 18: Encourage students to look for new vocabulary outside the classroom

Give homework assignments to …

- Read (easy books they enjoy)

- Search for new vocabulary in the 'landscape'

- You-tube

- Finding out things online

Tip 19: Don't over-use the dictionary

Students need to know how to use a dictionary when they are on their own.

So: good to teach dictionary skills.

But in class…

You are the best dictionary for them

Fast, accurate, user-friendly.

Tip #20: Never say never!

Tips are ideas that can often help, but there may be situations where they don't!

So use selectively, or adapt.

Never say never!

Thank you for your attention and participation!

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