

Guessing meaning from context: Whenever a guessable word occurs in a reading text, the teacher trains the students to employ the various strategies of inferring the meaning from context.

Exercises that focus on word form

Spelling dictation: The teacher calls out words or phrases for students to write down as accurately as possible.

Pronunciation: The teacher writes words on the board and asks students to choose a word and attempt the correct pronunciation. The teacher then gives feedback and/or models the correct pronunciation.

Word parts: The teacher writes words on pieces of paper and students cut them into parts and give the meanings of the parts. This is obviously useful for teaching prefixes and suffixes.

Exercises that focus on word use

Suggest collocations: The students work together in pairs or small groups to list collocations for a given word.

Word detectives: A student reports on an unfamiliar word they have found in their reading. They then give a mini-presentation about the meaning, spelling, pronunciation, word parts, origin, collocations, and grammar of the word.

Now that you have been presented with some simple and practical ideas for teaching vocabulary, it may be useful to delve a little deeper into vocabulary learning and teaching.

It is not always the case that students need to resort to specific vocabulary study books to learn new words. Many people who possess an extended vocabulary do not report having acquired it through direct learning activities and commercial coursebooks.

A common approach to vocabulary teaching starts with a list of words found in a reading or listening activity accompanied by translations in the students' first language and vocabulary exercises. Often, not much attention is given to approaches that ask students to build vocabulary from reading and listening through context, which presents a missed opportunity.

How does successful vocabulary acquisition take place?

For successful vocabulary acquisition to occur, students require a considerable amount of exposure to new words. The process of acquisition should follow a similar path to first language vocabulary acquisition: through context, associations, and constant exposure.

Students must be provided with opportunities for using vocabulary in memorable and meaningful situations. Selecting vocabulary learning activities should be guided by key factors such as how often the words are likely to be encountered and how necessary they are for producing effective communication.

Learning new words involves building up vocabulary from repertoire - that is, relating new words to previously acquired language. Try to imagine building blocks and stacking one layer over the other to consolidate vocabulary and build a strong foundation for future communication.

Teaching vocabulary should also take flexibility and creativity into account. The teacher should avoid approaching words as isolated and independent objects and preferably expose students to the way they are used in sentences and how they can group with other words to form collocations. As an example, apart from simply working out the meaning of the word 'go', it would also be effective to associate it with the preposition 'to' and present it as 'go to' - preferably in a sentence.

With lessons that focus on the receptive skills of reading and listening, it is useful to identify which words are most likely to be unfamiliar to students and do some pre-teaching. The idea is to make sure the students find the activity not only interesting but also meaningful and comprehensible. After students have read or listened to a text, the new vocabulary can be reinforced in other ways such as using flashcards or asking students to use the words in short writing or speaking activities.

Vocabulary learning needs according to proficiency level

Students' level of proficiency is another key consideration when approaching vocabulary learning activities.

Beginners benefit through direct vocabulary teaching as it fosters quick expansion in the number of words they know. Relevant activities might include using flashcards and illustrated handouts along with other memorisation strategies. This is a stage of early development, so it is important that the teacher also focuses on building confidence and a sense of self-accomplishment.

The approach with intermediate students should focus on expanding on already acquired vocabulary. For instance, students can explore the fact that the same word can have multiple meanings. This might involve students discovering how many different contexts they can use words like 'head' or 'park' for example. In addition, it is also valuable for intermediate students to work with affixes such as in-, un-, -less, -ly, and word families as in 'beauty, 'beautiful' and 'beautifully' as a way of expanding vocabulary range.

To build learner autonomy, encourage students to use their imagination so they can come up with their own ways of memorizing words based on their repertoire to consolidate the way they link new words to familiar ones.

Advanced students sometimes become frustrated because they feel that their vocabulary learning has plateaued. This often happens because they may already be familiar with the most frequent general words in the language. Therefore, consider increasing their exposure to academic vocabulary, which is likely to be far less familiar, but more likely to be encountered in future academic and professional life.

Learning vocabulary through context

Regardless of the level, activities requiring students to guess the meaning of a word from context are useful. This invites them to develop their self-sufficiency in contrast to a dependency on the teacher or dictionaries.

It is not only through reading that students can guess meaning from context but also through listening to stories, music, podcasts, and also from watching TV series, and films. Using the same principle of building vocabulary through repertoire, they provide audio and visual context clues.

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An example activity would be to choose a story that students are familiar with in their first language such as the story of "The Three Little Pigs". This will make it easier for them to guess the meaning of keywords as they should be able to relate them to an already known context. Students would likely already be familiar with many of the words in the story from their mother tongue. They would also be very familiar with the plot, so there is a rich and accessible context for them to guess the meaning of vocabulary.

Teaching strategies that can help students understand the meaning of unfamiliar words from context is important for their development as independent learners. To do this, they should be looking for context clues such as synonyms, antonyms, definitions, examples, and explanations.

For example, students should become aware that when encountering an unfamiliar word in a text, they should look for words in the sentence or surrounding sentences that help them deduce what the unknown word is. In the example below, we can see that the second sentence offers an 'antonym' that should if the student is aware of the strategy, help them decipher the meaning of 'distraught'.

*The English supporters were **distraught** after losing the final. They were not happy losing another penalty shootout.*

Let's use 'definition' as another example. Below, we can see that the second sentence essentially defines the word synthesise. Students should be made aware that phrases such as 'in other words' often signal the clarification of a key term or concept.

*Academic writing often requires students to **synthesise** the ideas of multiple authors. In other words, take key ideas from texts and combine them to produce an original text.*

It is important to realize that these context clues may not always be so obvious. Hence, teachers need to carefully evaluate if the activity is suited to students' proficiency level and current vocabulary range.

Learning vocabulary from context is effective, but it should not exclude direct teaching, especially if used as a way of increasing students' awareness and speeding up the development of specific language. By using context, it encourages students to identify and acquire new vocabulary independently because they are equipped with practical strategies. In addition, this approach should be directed to useful vocabulary which will not only enhance their comprehension of listening and reading texts but boost their ability to communicate in spoken and written English.

Word lists for vocabulary learning and teaching

Just as important as understanding what constitutes effective vocabulary teaching, it is also important to be clear on which vocabulary to target. It may not always be obvious for teachers to decide which vocabulary to teach. A good starting point is to consider established and recognised word lists such as the New General Service List (NGSL).

What is the NGSL?

The NGSL is a list comprised of words considered to be the most common and frequently occurring in English - roughly 2,000 headwords. These headwords define word families, for example: 'with: within, without', or 'day: daily, daylight'. It is estimated that the list covers 80% of all words found in general reading texts and 90% of the words used in spoken English.

As previously mentioned, advanced students should already be familiar with a wide range of general words so working with the NGSL might not be a priority for them. Instead, the Academic Word List (AWL) is a better alternative as it focuses on academic vocabulary. Students at this level are often entering universities where English is the medium of instruction, so the AWL provides not only a more challenging and rewarding set of target vocabulary but also one that is highly relevant.

What is the AWL?

The AWL consists of 570 word families of which 90% are not found in the NGSL. They cover 10% of words in academic texts and are often the most challenging. The list is divided into 10 sub-lists in line with the frequency they appear in academic texts, with sub-list 1 being the most frequent and sub-list 10 the least frequent.

For advanced students, both lists are important as when combined, they are estimated to cover 90% of the words found in academic texts.

How can wordlists be used in vocabulary teaching?

Teachers must consider a variety of ways and approaches when selecting vocabulary learning activities, especially regarding students' proficiency level. While beginners can benefit more from direct teaching and activities such as flashcards, intermediate students would be suited to more challenging activities such as guessing meaning from familiar and rich contexts.

Advanced students with a greater familiarity with words in the NGSL can take advantage of the sub-lists in the AWL, especially through reading activities. But it is important to keep in mind that it can be a rather tedious activity if planned for the duration of a whole class. At this level, students are most likely expecting practice in improving their speaking skills in more dynamic tasks such as peer and group interactions.

Therefore, it is better to approach the AWL as a self-study exercise through activities such as reading, matching, and writing exercises. These can be assigned as homework and later checked during class. This way both teacher and students can optimize class time by focusing on the practiced use of specific vocabulary rather than in direct learning.

To illustrate, the teacher could highlight AWL words in a reading passage. Students could then be asked to match these words with their correct definitions or work out their meanings from context, or even use a dictionary (if needed). After working with definitions, students could then match the target words with synonyms. Additionally, students could complete a chart of word families as a way of increasing exposure to their corresponding variations.

In summary, teachers need to deal with vocabulary as a long-term goal and be constantly aware that vocabulary acquisition can be a slow process that requires repetition. Simply presenting new words to students and expecting them to memorise their meaning is an ineffective practice. It is important to link vocabulary to previously acquired language. Meaningful, continuous, and thoughtful exposure to vocabulary is the key. Ultimately, teachers should not only seek to employ effective vocabulary learning activities, but also remember to be patient, attentive, and empathic.