

THE MOST ESSENTIAL WAYS OF TEACHING VOCABULARY.

Nishonova Dilduza Khomidovna

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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.

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 a situation. It's important to remember when you are eliciting (or explaining) 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.

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.

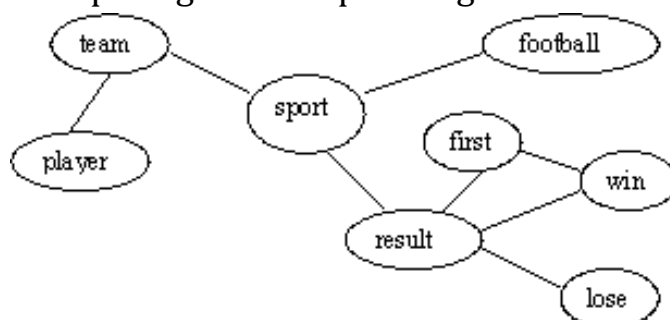
Techniques for learning vocabulary. Once vocabulary has been presented (and often before it is practised), students will need to start learning it. Practising and using the vocabulary is part of the learning process but students usually need time to process a vocabulary item too. The first stage is to find ways of recording the various aspects of the word. 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. 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. Using a picture to help you remember the expression – although the meaning is not 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 Uzbek I connect the Uzbek 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 Uzbek! 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 spidergrams. 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.

Collocations and grammar words. An important aspect of learning how to use vocabulary items is knowing what other words they collocate with. In many ways collocations are the building blocks of language and recent studies have found that native speakers often rely on pre-formulated chunks rather than putting words together one by one. Tasks in which we learn to match words to form collocations are always useful. For example, students can find out that we can have a packet of biscuits or a tin of biscuits but we wouldn't have a tube or a can of biscuits. Sometimes the collocations are almost grammatical in nature. After all, collocations are patterns of language which is exactly what grammar is. An example of this type of collocation would be with words such as make and do. We can make the bed, make breakfast, make a mistake, but we do stuff, do the housework and do language exercises! Therefore, helping our students learn collocations is a fundamental step in enabling them to use the language effectively.

Conclusion. 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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