

LANGUAGE SYSTEMS | VOCABULARY

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary (or lexis – a more technical term) is the area of language teaching and learning that deals with words. This generally includes the following items:

- **single words** (e.g. a noun like 'chair', a verb like 'play', etc.)
- **two or three words** that are combined to make one single meaning (e.g. a noun like 'shopping mall', a verb like 'give up' or 'put up with', etc.)
- **multi-word expressions** that represent a single item (e.g. phrases like 'by the way', 'all of a sudden', etc.)
- **words** which typically **go together** (e.g. 'golden opportunity', 'miss an opportunity', 'an opportunity arises', etc.)

A distinction in a learner's repertoire can be made in relation to:

- **productive vocabulary**, i.e. words that a learner is able to use (e.g. 'to cut')
- **receptive vocabulary**, i.e. words that a learner is able to recognize but may not necessarily use (e.g. 'to curtail').

First language users as well as learners tend to have a wider receptive vocabulary than a productive vocabulary, and give more attention to productive vocabulary as it can be of more **immediate** use.

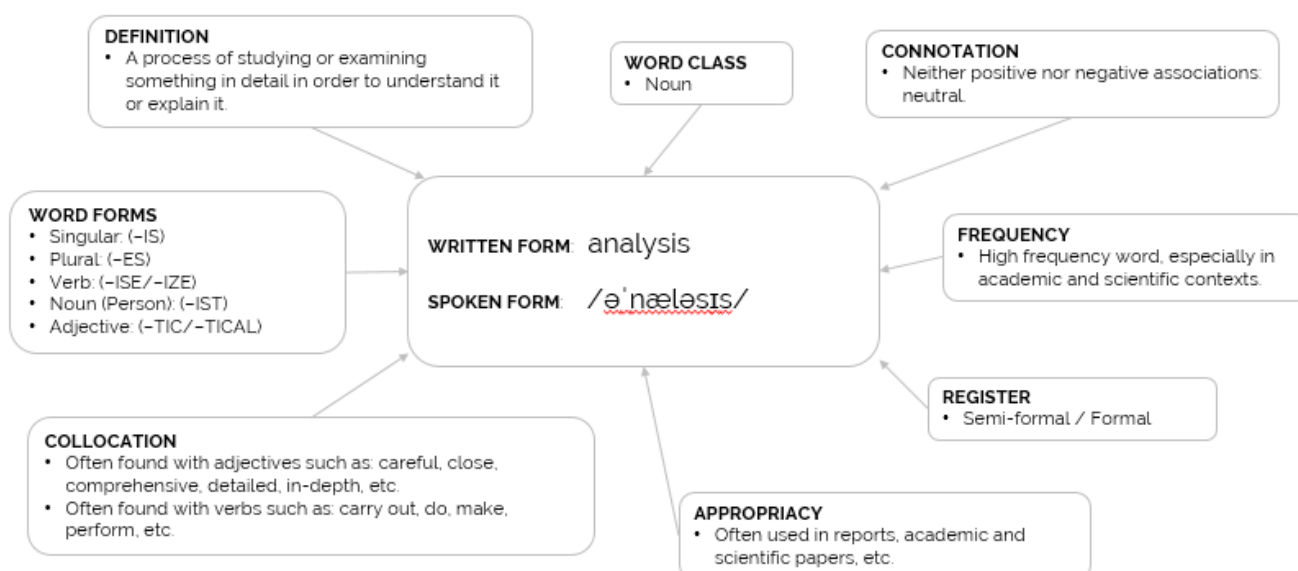
The choice of vocabulary for a course or lesson is usually influenced by:

- **frequency**, i.e. more frequent words (e.g. house) tend to be introduced before less frequent ones (e.g. bungalow)
- **lexical field**, i.e. words which are connected by the same topic or situation (e.g. house > kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, etc.)

Vocabulary in coursebooks tends to be presented according to these criteria. A useful tool to help teachers choose vocabulary for a lesson is a **learner's dictionary** (check the recommended online learner's dictionaries at the end of this handout) where information about frequency and additional resources to identify possible lexical fields are usually available.

KNOWING A WORD

Knowing a word involves much more than just knowing its meaning. It may involve knowing all these aspects of usage. Consider the word 'analysis'.



This can have **implications for teaching**. It is often useful, depending on context and learning objectives, to **expand the scope** of a clarification of a new word and **raise awareness** of relevant aspects of usage that go beyond the mere definition and the spelling.

How useful would it be for learners to know the meaning of the word 'analysis' if they didn't know, for example, what verbs it can be used with?

TEACHING A NEW WORD

The following is a description of a typical **presentation** and **clarification** of an abstract word.

Let's use a target word which is invented and, as you read and follow the sequence of techniques, try to think of the English equivalent of this word.

1 The teacher **establishes the context** for the new word.

2 The teacher **conveys the meaning** of the new word.

3 The teacher **elicits** or **provides** the new word.

*E.g. My friend Kelly really likes Korean pop music and she recently went to the concert of a famous Korean band she usually listens to. Unfortunately, the live performance of the band was not as good as Kelly had expected: the singing was pretty bad. Kelly was extremely **gordobashed**.*

4 The teacher **checks** that the students have **understood the meaning** through concept questions and/or personalized questions.

- Did Kelly think that the concert was going to be good? (Yes)
- Was the concert good? (No)
- Do you think Kelly was unhappy about it? (Yes)
- Has anyone ever felt like Kelly because something or someone was not as good as you expected? What happened?

5 The teacher **models the pronunciation** (including syllables and stress).

6 Students **practice saying** the new word.

7 The teacher **records the new word** on **the board** (highlighting parts of speech, features of pronunciation, collocation, etc.).

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[be, feel, look] **gordobashed** (ADJ) [by/at something – in/with someone]
/t/

8 Students **record** the new word.

- What do you think is the English equivalent of the invented word?

As you may have guessed, the invented word was 'disappointed'. Being a more abstract word describing a feeling, the teacher established the **context** for the new word and conveyed the **meaning** using a sort of anecdote or situational presentation (i.e. *My friend Kelly really likes...*). In this example, the teacher provided the word (i.e. *Kelly was extremely gordobashed*).

This may have helped the learners relate to the new word and start making guesses about its meaning. The teacher then used some **concept questions** to ensure that the learners had guessed correctly (i.e. *Did Kelly think that the concert was...?*) and invited the learners to give personal **examples** (i.e. *Has anyone ever felt like...? What happened?*) to further verify that learners could use the new word for the right purpose in the right situation.

After modeling **pronunciation** and some practice, the teacher **recorded** the new word on the board with some information about its usage.

This example is by no means a fixed way in which new vocabulary should be presented. In many cases, there are more efficient techniques to convey meaning and check understanding.

Imagine you need to present and clarify the word 'chair'. Wouldn't a picture be more effective than an anecdote? What if you needed to check understanding of the word 'necklace'? Wouldn't asking the learners to show you one be less confusing than asking questions?

For more information on how to formulate and use **concept questions**, please refer to the following handout:

- **Conveying Meaning & Concept Questions**

TECHNIQUES TO CONVEY MEANING

The following are common techniques to convey the **meaning** of new words.

- **Picture/drawing** (e.g. concrete nouns like 'chair', 'tiger', etc.)
- **Realia** (e.g. any word for which there is an object that can be brought into the classroom)
- **Mime/gesture** (e.g. actions like 'to stroll', 'to clap', etc.)
- **Definition/explanation** (e.g. any word provided the definition is less complex than the new word)
- **Synonym/antonym** (e.g. words which have a similar meaning like 'big and large', or words which have a direct opposite like 'hot and cold')
- **Examples/types of the kind** (e.g. words that include the meanings of other particular words like 'cutlery', 'vehicle', etc.)
- **Anecdote/situational presentation** (e.g. abstract words which need to be contextualized like 'frustrated', 'to flunk', etc.)
- **Scale/cline** (e.g. words which express the amount, degree or level of something like 'never, hardly ever, seldom, sometimes, etc.)
- **Graph/diagram** (e.g. words which can be represented by a simple drawing made of lines like 'average', 'fluctuate', etc.)
- **Translation** (e.g. any word provided there is a direct equivalent)

Sometimes, a **single technique** may not be sufficient to convey the meaning of a new word. A teacher recently tried to convey the meaning of 'shy' using a picture alone. Regrettably, the picture led the learners to believe that the meaning was that of 'embarrassed'. The same picture combined with an anecdote or situational presentation could have avoided confusion.

PLANNING A VOCABULARY LESSON

A vocabulary lesson can often be sequenced using popular lesson **frameworks** like Practice-Production (PPP), Test-Teach-Test (T-T-T) or Task-based Learning (TBL).

For more information on Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) and how to plan a lesson using this framework, please refer to the following handouts:

- **Methodology | Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP)**
- **Lesson Frameworks | PPP**

For more information on Test-Teach-Test (T-T-T) and how to plan a lesson using this framework, please refer to the following handouts:

- **Methodology | Test-Teach-Test (T-T-T)**
- **Lesson Frameworks | T-T-T**

For more information on Task-based Learning (TBL) and how to plan a lesson using this framework, please refer to the following handouts:

- **Methodology | Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)**
- **Lesson Frameworks | TBL**

TEACHING TIPS

- Present new words in context: learners need to familiarize themselves with the concepts embedded in a word and need to see it in its natural linguistic environment.
- Check that learners understood the meaning of a new word. Ask learners to give examples or ask 'probing questions'.
- Make sure learners are familiar with aspects of meaning, use, form and pronunciation.
- Avoid presenting new words in isolation and get into the habit of highlighting the most frequent collocations, i.e. what verbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions, expressions, etc. are frequently found with a particular word.
- Differentiate between new vocabulary taught for 'recognition' and new vocabulary taught for 'production': the former may need less work on form.
- Encourage learners not to rely on direct L1 translations too much. L1 can be a support, but it can also be cause of interference.
- Expose learners to the same word multiple times: learners will be better able to recall new words if they are recycled often.
- Give learners opportunities to personalize new words: personalization will make new words more memorable.
- Help learners create 'association of ideas' when learning new words. Mental images of a new word can have a positive effect on memory.
- Equip learners with strategies that will help them learn new words independently. Teach them how to use a learner's dictionary.
- Involve learners as actively as possible in the learning of new words and encourage them to record new words in the way they find most effective: mind maps, lexical sets, alphabetical word book, etc.
- Reassure learners that learning new words will take some time and some initial confusion.
- Do not overload learners with long lists of new words. There is only a certain amount of information that learners will be able to process meaningfully in a single lesson.
- Encourage learners to read for pleasure and guess the meaning of new words from context. Implicit learning of vocabulary can result in quicker vocabulary expansion.

ONLINE LEARNER'S DICTIONARIES

Cambridge Learner's Dictionary
 Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
 Macmillan Dictionary
 Oxford Learner's Dictionaries
 Oxford Collocation Dictionary

dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english
ldoceonline.com
macmillandictionary.com
oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com
freecollocation.com

FURTHER READING

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