

Handout: Teaching Vocabulary

The first step in preparing students to communicate in English is helping them acquire a basic vocabulary of useful words and phrases. It can take as many as 20 or more exposures to a new word in written or oral form for a language learner to truly understand that word. Keep in mind the following guidelines when you are teaching vocabulary:

Teach only a few new words at a time. Aim for no more than 8 to 10 new words per lesson.

Choose one way to say something and stick with it. For example, if you teach the expression “Turn off the light,” don’t give other versions of the same expression (“Switch off the light,” “Turn out the light,” or “Put out the light”).

Contextualize vocabulary. There are several ways to do this:

- **Use pictures that show the word in context.** For example, it’s easier to define the word “deer” by showing a student pictures of deer in the woods than it is to tell them it’s a four-legged animal that eats grass and has antlers.
- **Use realia.** Bring in the actual objects you are teaching. For example, bring in an apple, orange, pear, and banana if you are teaching fruits.
- **Teach words in groupings.** For example, if you were trying to help a student develop the vocabulary needed to talk to the doctor, you would teach body parts together as one lesson, and teach ailment words (such as *cut*, *ache*, or *burn*) in the next lesson.
- **Teach words contextualized in common phrases.** If you were teaching vocabulary words to help a student order food, you wouldn’t just teach individual words like *large*, *small*, *drink*, *pizza*, *pepperoni*, or *sausage*. You would teach the phrase “I would like a small pepperoni pizza and a small drink,” then let the student practice using different vocabulary words in the phrase.
- **Use themed pictures to group vocabulary words and phrases.** Show students a picture like this one and ask them what they see. Write the words on the board, then put the words in phrases and sentences. For example, students might use the vocabulary *woman*, *books*, and *buy*. You can put those words together in as the sentence “The woman is buying books.”
- **Act it out.** If you are teaching verbs like *sit*, *stand*, *walk*, or *jump*, act them out.



Use several examples of the vocabulary word for clarity. That way, there is no danger that students will misunderstand what the word means. For example, to teach the word *yellow*, show students three things that are yellow: a pencil, a lemon, and a picture of a taxi. If you use only one, students might mistakenly think that you are teaching the word *pencil* or *write*.

Teach vocabulary in a consistent fashion. Aim for a routine each time you introduce a new group of words. For example, you might routinely follow these steps:

- Say each word or phrase and have students watch and listen.
- Say the word or phrase again and invite students to repeat it.
- Check for comprehension by asking direct questions: “What is this?”
- Have students practice using the word or phrase with each other.

Use repetition. To learn new words permanently, students need to hear and use them over and over again. Your teaching routine should include recycling new words in later lessons. Here’s an example: You are helping a student prepare for a job interview, and you are teaching related vocabulary words such as *application*, *manager*, *interview*, and *thank-you note*. You present the vocabulary, practice it in a comprehension exercise, and have the student use the vocabulary in sentences. In the next class, you can review the words through a game, a dictation, or a job interview role- play.

Link vocabulary to practical application. For most ESL students, learning English is a means to an end. Students want to learn English so they can meet basic needs (buy groceries), access resources in their community (make a doctor’s appointment), and interact with others (introduce themselves to coworkers). Choose words and phrases that help students accomplish these goals. Design practice activities that prepare students to use words and phrases outside class.

Ask students to create personal dictionaries. Give each student a notebook. At the top of each page, have students write one letter of the alphabet. As students learn important words or phrases, they can write them in the notebook along with definitions, translations, pictures, or other information that will help them use the words.

Encourage students to record words and phrases using their phones. Recordings can help students with pronunciation as well as remembering new vocabulary.

Notes: