

Are you sometimes unsure about the best way to deal with vocabulary in different kinds of lessons? This lesson will help you make better decisions on different approaches.

Task 1 – Emily’s pace

Student feedback

Emily prepared her vocabulary lesson thoroughly. She taught 12 new words associated with the topic of ecology and prepared good questions to elicit words and check their meaning. During the lesson, she felt things dragged a little bit. After the lesson, one of the students told her in the nicest possible way that it seemed to take a long time to learn the new words.



How could Emily have made the vocabulary lesson more interesting for her students and improved the pace? Jot down your answers on a note pad, then check the answer key below. 🗝️

Task 1 Feedback 🗝️

It seems that Emily elicited each word individually. Twelve is quite a large number of words with which to do this and it probably meant she had a very long teacher-fronted stage in her lesson. Because all the words were on the same topic it might have been better to use a student-centred worksheet for the vocabulary. For example, students could have matched words to definitions or labelled a diagram or something similar. This means that learners would be more actively engaged in learning the words and would determine their own learning rate rather than being fully dependent on the teacher.

Key Skill

There are 3 key ways of teaching vocabulary to students: 1) by means of teacher-fronted elicitation or explanation; 2) by means of a student-centred vocabulary task; 3) by getting students to work out the meaning of new words they find in a text using the context to help them.

ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook

Teaching Vocabulary 1: Different approaches: Unit 4 b)

Task 2 – What’s the best way?



Letters a to h describe different teaching or learning situations that involve vocabulary. Decide which of the following approaches is the most suitable, and circle the correct letter.

Approaches

T = teacher fronted explanation or elicitation

S = student-centred task

C = use the context to work out the meaning

Teaching / Learning Situations for vocabulary	Approaches
a. 2 new words before a speaking activity.	T S C
b. 4 words in a reading text that are not important for an understanding of the text.	T S C
c. 8 words from a listening text that are important to an understanding of the text.	T S C
d. A set of about 10 words based around a topic or theme (e.g. crime words).	T S C
e. A couple of words that crop up unexpectedly in the lesson.	T S C
f. 3 words that are included in a grammar practice activity.	T S C
g. A list of verbs and nouns that go together (collocation) e.g. nouns that go with 'make and 'do'.	T S C
h. 4 words that are specific to a particular kind of written language e.g. legal words.	T S C

Check your ideas in the answer key. 🗝️

Key Skill

Your approach to teaching vocabulary will vary depending on the type of lesson you are teaching. Course books often use student-centred tasks before reading or listening texts. Using the context to work out meaning is often done after reading or listening tasks.

Task 3 – Teacher-fronted vocabulary teaching



A teacher fronted approach is often used when the main lesson aim is to clarify a lexical set of vocabulary. Letters a to f are steps in the procedure for eliciting a word. Numbers i to vi give a rationale for each step. Put the steps in their correct order in the table below, then find the rationale that matches each step.

- Steps for eliciting a word**
- a. Check that students understand the meaning of the word by asking a concept question.
 - b. Write up the word on the white board and provide grammar information.
 - c. Drill the word.
 - d. Provide the word, if students do not know it
 - e. Elicit the word
 - f. Convey the meaning using a picture or an oral definition.

- Rationale for each step**
- i. Students need to learn the spelling and part of speech of the word.
 - ii. It is easier for students to start with the concept rather than the word itself.
 - iii. If the students clearly do not know the word, then the teacher has to give it.
 - iv. This allows students to contribute the word if they know it.
 - v. It is a good idea to ensure students are sure about the meaning of the word before you ask them to say it.
 - vi. Because English spelling is often strange, it is better for students to learn the sound of the new word before they see how it is written.

Steps	Rationale


Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

There is often more than one way to convey the meaning of any given word. It's the teacher's job to choose the most effective method for each word.

Task 4 – Getting the meaning across



There are different ways that the teacher can convey the meaning of a word in order to try and elicit it. In the left-hand column below there are 8 words. Letters a to h describe different methods of getting the meaning of words across. Choose the best method for each word. 

Words	Methods
1. hop (v)	
2. viability (n)	
3. exhausted (adj)	
4. kiwifruit (n)	
5. bitter (adj)	
6. imitate (v)	
7. skyscraper (n)	
8. rarely (adv)	

Method for getting meaning across

- a. Showing students a physical object of some kind – sometimes called 'realia'.
- b. Doing a mime or action.
- c. Explaining the meaning by giving an oral definition of the word.
- d. Asking students to think about the opposite meaning of a word they already know.
- e. Using a cline or diagram.
- f. Using a picture of something.
- g. Telling a short, personal story to give an example of the meaning.
- h. Getting students to read a short written text that acts as a context for the word.

Thinking about your teaching ...

Try different approaches to teaching vocabulary in the classroom and note how your students respond to the different approaches. Try to evaluate each approach in terms of the clarity for students and their motivation to learn.

Note your conclusions in your *Teaching Log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

Choose one of the approaches described in the tasks above that you are less familiar with. Try using this approach with your students and evaluate its effectiveness.

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 226 to 236 of *Learning Teaching (2nd edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is reading on vocabulary (called 'lexis' in the text) and how to deal with it in the classroom.

On pages 229 to 234 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4th edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007), there is further reading on introducing vocabulary.

See also section 4 of *Language Teaching Classroom Practice DVD & Workbook* by Heather Richards and Karen Wise (AUT University 2007).

Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to this topic:

- **Unit 4 c) Teaching vocabulary 2: Concept checking** (*recommended as a follow-up to this lesson, focusing on clarifying meaning of new lexis in more depth for learners*)

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

- a) T
- b) C
- c) S
- d) S
- e) T
- f) T
- g) S
- h) C

Task 4 – Feedback

- 1) b
- 2) h
- 3) g
- 4) a
- 5) d
- 6) c
- 7) f
- 8) e

Task 3 – Feedback

- 1) f and ii
- 2) e and iv
- 3) d and iii
- 4) a and v
- 5) c and vi
- 6) b and i