

Do you feel that sometimes you should check that students have understood new vocabulary more systematically? Do you sometimes forget to ask concept questions? If that's the case, this lesson will give you some useful pointers for writing effective concept questions for vocabulary. It will also give you some practice. Before you complete this task, it may be helpful to have looked at *Teaching Vocabulary 1: Different approaches*.

Task 1 – Was matching enough?

Pat: "I did a reading lesson with my students the other day. There were some difficult words in the text, so I made a task where students had to match the words to the definitions. Students got one or two words wrong, but during feedback, they mostly had correct answers. However, when they came to read the text, they still had problems with the words in the task. I don't understand why."



Can you help Pat? Jot down your ideas / suggestions on a note pad, then check the answer key below.



Task 1 Feedback

Matching a new word to a definition will not always check students' understanding of that word in enough detail. Beyond the matching task, it is a good idea to use concept questions to make sure students have a firm grasp of the meaning.

Key Skill

Concept questions are questions that focus on the meaning of a new word or phrase, for example, all aspects of the definition, the level of formality and sometimes the context in which you can use a word. They help students to consider words in more depth.

Task 2 – Advice on concept questions



Numbers 1 to 8 show advice on concept questions. Decide whether you think the advice is good or bad, then give a reason for your decision.

Advice	Good or Bad?	Reason
1. “Do you understand?” is not an effective concept question and should be avoided.		
2. If you explain words in a lot of detail, it is often possible not to ask concept questions.		
3. Whenever possible it pays to prepare concept questions in advance.		
4. It’s not a good idea to use a dictionary when preparing concept questions as the definitions can be confusing.		
5. When students repeat the word back to you, it’s an indication that they have understood the meaning.		
6. Concept questions need to be simple and specific rather than being very general.		
7. It is efficient to check all meanings of a word at the same time.		
8. The answers to concept questions need to be as short as possible.		

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Concept questions need to be clear and easy for students to understand. They should have short, simple answers. It pays to check just one concept at a time. Good concept questions are difficult to think of on the spot so it’s a good idea to prepare your questions in advance.

Task 3 – Relevant concept questions



Below are 8 words, each is followed by 4 concept questions and their anticipated answers in brackets. One of the concept questions in each set of 4 is not really relevant or necessary to checking the meaning of the word. Decide which concept question can be deleted from each set.

Words and concept questions

1. fade (adj)

- a) If something fades, does it become more or less clear? (less clear)
- b) Does this usually happen quickly or slowly? (usually slowly)
- c) Can colours in clothes fade? (yes)
- d) Do clothes designers like colours that fade? (not usually)

2. shuffle (v)

- a) Is this a way of walking? (yes)
- b) Do you wear special shoes when you shuffle? (no)
- c) Do you walk quickly or slowly? (slowly)
- d) Do you lift your feet when you shuffle? (no)

3. make off (phr v.)

- a) Do you leave quickly or slowly? (quickly)
- b) Is it because you did something wrong? (yes)
- c) Did you have another appointment to go to? (no)
- d) Did you do something wrong before or after leaving? (before)

4. critique (n)

- a) Do you give your opinion? (yes)
- b) Do you write your opinion down? (not necessarily)
- c) Is your opinion always negative? (no)
- d) Is this a more formal word? (yes)

5. despondent (adj)

- a) Do you feel happy or unhappy? (unhappy)
- b) Does your present situation make you feel unhappy? (yes)
- c) Do you think the situation will improve? (no)
- d) Are you worried about money? (perhaps)

6. stand off (n)

- a) Is a stand off between 2 people or 2 groups of people (could be either)
- b) Do people stand up when they disagree? (not always)
- c) Do people sometimes have a fight before a stand off? (yes)
- d) Can either person do anything to win? (no)

7. incoherent (adj)

- a) Did the writer think about the text carefully before writing it? (probably not)
- b) Is the text well written? (no)
- c) Is it easy to understand? (no)
- d) Is it badly organised (yes)

8. mope (v)

- a) Do you feel bored and perhaps unhappy? (yes)
- b) Do you show that you are interested in things? (no)
- c) Do you want to do things when you mope? (no)
- d) Do dogs mope? (they could)

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

It is important to focus on core meaning of words when writing concept questions and not introduce unnecessary questions that could confuse students. Using examples of how the word is used can be useful, but the examples do need to be relevant to the context in which the word is being presented.

Task 4 – Writing concept questions



Write concept questions and answers for the vocabulary items a – h below. For each item no more than four concept questions.

Vocabulary items

- a. embarrassed (adj)
- b. put up with (v)
- c. barracks (n)
- d. justify (v)
- e. substitute (n)
- f. mercenary (adj)
- g. reclaim (v)
- h. let the side down (idiom)

The feedback provides *suggested* answers and variation is possible. 

Thinking about your teaching ...

It is interesting to work out whether concept checking leads to passive recognition only or productive use of new vocabulary items. Try teaching 5 or 6 words then an hour or so later, see if students can remember the meanings when they encounter those words in a text. A few days later, teach a different set of words and then an hour later give them a gap fill task in which students need to be able to use these words (e.g. a gapped text). Which is easier for students?

Note your conclusions in your *Teaching Log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

With students from intermediate level upwards, it could be an interesting exercise to get them to teach each other vocabulary and use concept questions. You will need to provide them with mono-lingual dictionaries and allow them plenty of time. However, it means that students will deal with the meaning of the words they teach in a lot of detail.

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 246 - 251 of *Learning Teaching (2nd edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on dealing with the meaning of new vocabulary and the full extent to which this needs to be considered. This will help in the writing of concept questions.

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 b) Vocabulary 1: Different Approaches**
(recommended as a precursor to this lesson)
- **Unit 4 g) Teaching Grammar 4: Concept-checking grammar**
(looks at how to check meaning of grammar with learners by using oral concept questions)

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

1. Good advice.

Reason: *Students will usually answer this question with the word 'yes' in order to save face or avoid any further complications even if they don't understand the word.*

2. Bad advice.

Reason: *Students will often not understand the detailed explanation, so there is no guarantee that this will make things clearer for learners. Detailed explanations do not check understanding of new language.*

3. Good advice.

Reason: *Concept questions are not always straight-forward and easy to create. If you know you have got new vocabulary items in a lesson, then it makes sense to prepare concept questions for these words in advance. It makes life easier in the classroom. Clearly, it is not possible to pre-prepare for words that crop up in a lesson. You need to do those spontaneously as well as you possibly can.*

4. Bad advice.

Reason: *Dictionaries are really useful tools when preparing concept questions because they help you see all aspects of a definition that need to be checked.*

5. Bad advice.

Reason: *This involves repetition of the sound of the word and is not an indication that students know what the word means.*

6. Good advice.

Reason: *The language of the question needs to be easy for students to understand and it pays to focus on the specific meaning of a word in one particular context.*

7. Bad advice.

Reason: *This is likely to confuse the students and it pays to check one meaning at a time.*

8. Good advice.

Reason: *They should be words or phrases that students can say quickly and easily. Long-winded answers are difficult for students to formulate, even when they do understand the meaning of the word.*

Task 3 – Feedback

- 1) d
- 2) b
- 3) c
- 4) b
- 5) d
- 6) b
- 7) a
- 8) d

Task 4 – Feedback

a. *embarrassed* (adj)

question 1: Is this a good feeling? (no)

question 2: Are you worried about what other people will think? (yes)

question 3: Does your face sometimes go red? (yes)

b. *put up with* (v)

question 1: Do you 'put up with' with a thing or a person or both? (both)

question 2: Do you like this thing or person (no)

question 3: Do you accept the thing or person (yes)

question 4: Are you patient or impatient? (patient)

c. *barracks* (n)

question 1: Are 'barracks' one building or a group of buildings? (a group of buildings)

question 2: Who lives in 'barracks'? (soldiers, people from armed forces)

question 3: Do they work there too? (yes)

d. *justify* (v)

question 1: If you 'justify' something, do you think some people have the wrong idea about that thing? (yes)

question 2: Do you believe there is a good reason why your idea is better? (yes)

question 3: Do you say or do something directly or indirectly? (directly)

question 4: Do you use examples? (possibly)

e. *substitute* (n)

question 1: If you need a 'substitute', can you use what you normally use? (no)

question 2: Do you use something new and different? (yes)

question 3: Is it the same as the original? (no)

question 4: Can a person be a substitute as well as a thing ? (yes)

f. *mercenary* (adj)

question 1: Does this word describe people or things? (people)

question 2: Do 'mercenary' people have a positive attitude? (no)

question 3: Are they interested in money they can get? (yes very)

question 4: Do they also want other advantages for themselves from a situation? (yes)

g. *reclaim* (v)

question 1: Did someone take something from you in the past? (yes)

question 2: When you 'reclaim' some thing, do you want to get it back? (yes)

question 3: Can you 'reclaim' something that someone borrowed? (yes)

question 4: Can you reclaim land? (yes)

h. *let the side down* (idiom)

question 1: Do we say this about people or things or both? (both, but most often people)

question 2: If you 'let the side down', do you work less hard and make mistakes? (yes)

question 3: Does this affect other people? (yes)

question 4: Do we use this more in speaking than writing? (yes)