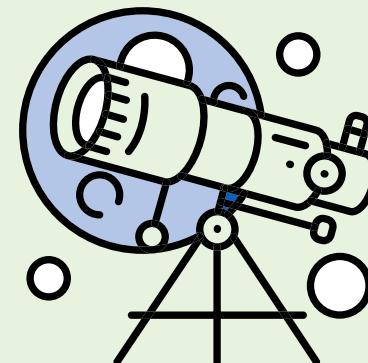
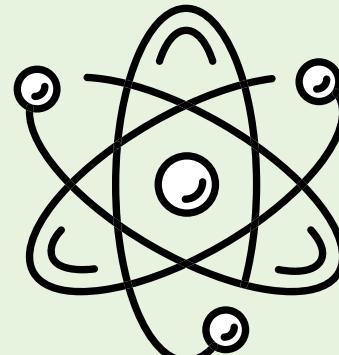
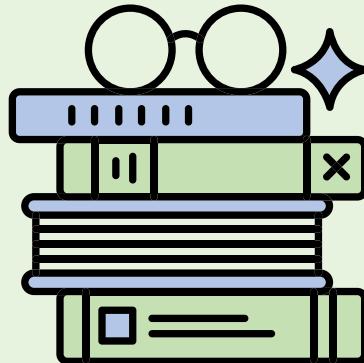
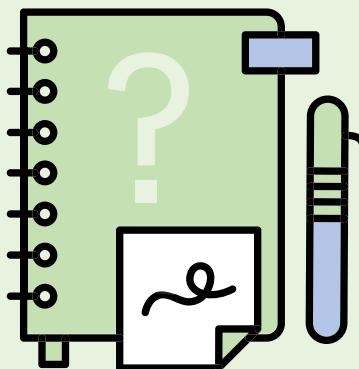


# What's all in a word?!

## Vocabulary learning and teaching

By Laura Loder Buechel and Isabelle Udry



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MULTILINGUALISM

# What's all in a word?!

## Vocabulary learning and teaching

Have you ever wondered how much vocabulary your students truly need to communicate effectively in a foreign language? Or whether there are ways to teach vocabulary other than simply having students memorize lists of words? Building lexical knowledge is a crucial part of language learning, which is why it's important to understand how vocabulary is learned and retained.

This handout addresses key aspects of vocabulary instruction. Each section starts with a basic question, then offers ideas for selecting the right words, presenting them in context, and giving students the tools they need to actively use and retain the targeted vocabulary. Over the course of the handout, you will discover more about the principles behind vocabulary learning and get to know practical strategies for use in the classroom. Whether you're just starting out in your teaching career or you're an experienced professional looking to improve your methods, you'll find concrete advice to help your students build their vocabulary.

This PDF is interactive, to improve the reading experience.  
Use the Links in the Table of Contents to navigate.

## Content



### The big picture

- A How important is vocabulary learning and how much time should be spent on it in class? 3
- B How much vocabulary do students need to be able to use a language? 3
- C How many words should I teach in one lesson? 4



### Understanding vocabulary knowledge

- D How do we store and learn words? 5
- E What does it mean to know a word? 6
- F What makes a word easy or hard to learn? 6
- G What are the most useful words to teach? 7



### Vocabulary presentation and teaching strategies

- H How do I introduce new words to students? 8
- I Should I teach vocabulary as single words or as "chunks"? 10
- J Should I provide students with translations of words? 11



### Vocabulary practice and retention

- K How do I get learners to notice vocabulary? 12
- L How can learners practice vocabulary effectively and should I use lists? 12
- M What are some classroom rituals that focus on vocabulary learning? 13
- N How can I motivate learners to study vocabulary for homework? 14
- O Why does exposure to vocabulary outside the classroom matter? 15



### Vocabulary testing and assessment

- P Should I use vocabulary-translation tests? 16
- Q How should I test vocabulary? 16

### References

### Links

### Publication details



## A How important is vocabulary learning and how much time should be spent on it in class?

Learning vocabulary is a natural part of any classroom or subject – knowing words leads to understanding concepts, words are fun to play with, and having a large vocabulary enables greater expression.

In first language acquisition, much vocabulary learning happens implicitly; when learning a second language, more deliberate attention needs to be paid to words due to the limited amount of time learners are exposed to the language. Both explicit instruction and incidental learning (through a language-rich classroom) are important factors in vocabulary instruction. Teachers can use targeted vocabulary activities to encourage learners to notice words, which may help them notice language even when there is no explicit focus on vocabulary.

Because every language classroom will have learners whose skills in the target language vary, it's important to leave room for individual choice in what specific vocabulary they learn.

How much time is spent on explicit vocabulary activities depends on different aspects, including how complicated the topic is, how many cognates (parallel words) to the language of schooling or the students' heritage language there are, and what learners should be able to do with the words.

Vocabulary activities should be part of balanced instruction in which learners benefit from a mix of approaches: exposure through reading and listening, opportunities to use vocabulary in speaking and writing, and practical

activities to build fluency. Explicit vocabulary teaching should take up no more than a quarter of the total learning time.



### Try this

Have your learners play vocab tennis.

- Have your learners stand in pairs a good distance from one another.
- One pretends to "serve" the ball with a pretend racquet and says a word. The partner has to say a word beginning with the last letter of the word served and "returns" that word.
- Alternatively, they can "volley" associations back and forth, short expressions, what the word is not (I say "apple" and my partner hits back with "apples aren't pears" and I hit back with "pears are not monkeys!" This can get silly, but it's also a fun way to focus on structure.)

## B How much vocabulary do students need to be able to use a language?

When we consider the type of conversation or text our students are likely to encounter, we find that a relatively small number of words enables them to do a lot with the language. For basic communication, around 1,000 to 2,000 high-frequency word families are enough to manage most everyday communicative situations.

A word family is a group of words that are related in meaning and form, i.e. they share a common root, for example: the play-to play-player-playful and so on. The good thing about word families is that once learners know the root, they can understand most related words, even if they've never encountered them before.

For increased comprehension of spoken and written texts (e.g. of novels or newspapers), learners must be familiar with an estimated 6,000 to 9,000 word families. To put it in perspective, L1 speakers use approximately 11,000 families. These numbers are similar in French and German.



### Try this

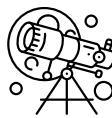
Know what level your students are at – there may be a lot of variation in your classroom:

- Oxford Placement Test – this also has a Young Learners version
- Macmillan, Pearson, Penguin readers all have placement tests for their books
- Cambridge has "Speak and Improve" and "Write and Improve" tools which also provide an estimation of the level
- AI tools are constantly developing and some (such as Twee or Cathoven) use the CEFR databases

If you're looking for lists of high-frequency words, try searching for the following:

- BNC/COCA and GSL lists
- Dolch or Fry site word lists
- The Oxford 3000

L1: A learner's first language or mother tongue  
L2: An additional language learnt after the L1



## C How many words should I teach in one lesson?

There is no fixed number of words to teach per lesson; rather, this depends on several considerations. Some estimates suggest that teaching 13 words a lesson is appropriate if learners should know the most common 1,000 words within the 38 weeks of a school year (with two lessons per week). However, this estimate leaves out important aspects such as learner age or first language (if the languages are similar, there may be many cognates, which facilitates learning vocabulary). In general, the best approach is to focus on what students need to do with the vocabulary and not how many words they should learn.

Instead of asking how many, consider the following:

- **Lesson goals:** Should students be able to recite a poem? Describe a funny animal? Write a story on their own? The learning goals should guide vocabulary selection.
- **Familiarity:** Do students already know part of the word (a related word or a cognate)?
- **Receptive vs. productive knowledge:** Should students recognize the word when they see it, or should they be able to use it actively?
- **Depth of knowledge:** Does the word have multiple meanings (e.g. “foot” as a body part vs. “foot” as part of a mountain?) and how important is it to focus on these meanings during lessons?
- **Reinforcement:** Will the word come up again? Remember, repeated exposure is key to building vocabulary. High-frequency words benefit from recycling.

- **Context and function:** Are words presented in chunks or in isolation? For example, “pen or pencil?” is more useful than “pen” and “pencil” separately.

Focusing on these factors will help you teach vocabulary effectively, regardless of how many words you teach in one lesson.



### Try this

Hand out a relatively long list of words (e.g. Cambridge Young Learners Movers word lists) to each learner. Each learner receives the same list but is assigned a different topic, for example “holidays” or “school” or “nature.” If you have a class of 20, choose 10 topics so two people have the same topic. First have learners work individually to make a word cloud using vocabulary from the list related to “their” topic; each time they use a word, they should tick it on their list (this indicates that they know it). In addition, have them look up a few words they *think* might be related but aren’t sure.

Then, in partner work, have the two learners with the same topic compare their answers: did they associate the topic to the same words? Let them teach each other words that aren’t on the other person’s list.

Have learners then work in small groups of mixed topics to answer the following questions:

- Which words were the same for different topics and why?
- Which words were different? Why?

Have your learners add unknown words with a picture, definition or example sentence to their vocabulary notebooks.



## D How do we store and learn words?

Vocabulary learning is like building a network of connected meanings and forms that expands and strengthens over time. Students who start learning a foreign language at school have typically already acquired a rich vocabulary base in their first language (L1), which may help them make connections to the second language (L2).

Rather than being stored in our memory like a file saved on a computer with a click, words are mapped in the brain (our “mental lexicon”) through a growing network of associations. One way this happens is by linking L2 words to the L1 equivalents, then organizing them into categories to help structure the language, and from there, making associations between related words and concepts. This process is influenced by how the new language has been taught (e.g. in a multimodal way through images or gestures) and a learner’s prior knowledge and experience with language.



### Try this

#### Initial contact (linking form and meaning)

- Picture/definition-word matching: Use colourful flashcards or digital apps to have learners match pictures or definitions to words
- Total Physical Response (TPR): Have learners act out words (e.g., “jump!” or “yesterday” vs “tomorrow”)
- Songs and chants: Use repetitive songs with gestures to reinforce meaning (e.g., “I like to move it, move it!”)
- Picture stories: Use picture books (there are picture books for any level) and as you read, point to the pictures and say or elicit the words; also point to the words as you read
- Flashcards and word lists: Encourage self-study with flashcards or intermittent repetition with apps like Quizlet or Anki using pictures, definitions, associations, translations
- Labelling: Have learners place post-it notes with L2 words on realia – this can also include locations of where things are or common expressions such as “sit on a chair” which is stuck to the chair

#### Structuring and networking language

- Sorting games: Provide realia or lists of words and have learners sort them into categories; the categories for each learner are potentially different, making it interesting for them to share, discuss, and even guess what categories their peers chose
- Mind maps / association webs: Have learners pick a topic (e.g. “things at the beach”) or a word (e.g. “Switzerland”) and they can write or draw associations that can also be opposites or similar words
- Semantic mapping: Have learners start with one word, then branch out with related concepts (e.g. “music” → “instrument,” “concert,” “playlist”)
- “Odd One Out”: Show four pictures/words and ask learners to name which one doesn’t belong and explain their decision
- New York Times “Connections” game: This game provides 16 words, with four sets of four words that have something in common; learners can also design their own “Connection” games
- Topic-based vocabulary lists: Have students structure lists based on themes like “workplace,” “travel,” or “health”



### E What does it mean to know a word?

Thinking of vocabulary knowledge as a growing network helps you realize that knowing a word is more than just recalling a definition.

Words aren't simply "known" or "unknown". Rather, vocabulary knowledge involves multiple dimensions, including a word's form, meaning, and use. Also, vocabulary skills can be receptive (when reading and listening) or productive (when speaking and writing).

Acquiring skills in the various dimensions requires repeated exposure to L2 words in different contexts, which reinforces their place in the expanding network of meaning.

Understanding what it means to know a word helps you experiment with different ways of introducing and testing vocabulary.

### F What makes a word easy or hard to learn?

How easy or difficult it is to learn a word depends on many factors. For instance, parallel words or cognates are generally easier to learn.

Words that follow predictable spelling and grammatical patterns also have a lower learning burden (e.g. it's easier to learn "walk – walked" than "go – went"). Knowing part of a word also promotes additional learning (e.g. "happy" in "happiness"). Lastly, some words are just fun (e.g. "dillydally"), although this is very subjective.

Closely related words such as synonyms, antonyms, or words in lexical sets like months or vegetables can be harder to learn when taught together. Semantic similarity increases interference, making these words more difficult to distinguish and remember. To minimize this effect, consider how and when to introduce them (see H and L for strategies).

Using multiple modes of learning can make words easier to learn and remember. This includes embodied learning, which draws on movement, visualization, and sensory interaction to strengthen word retention and map vocabulary into the mental lexicon. Encouraging students to engage with words through gestures, imagery, and emotional connections may also facilitate vocabulary learning. For example, you can support your students by discussing or miming personal associations with words (e.g. "How do you react when you see a dog? Are you scared or do you want to pet it?" vs "Show me 'dog'!"), or by giving them time to visualize a situation ("Imagine you're eating your favourite meal. What's on the table?"). Expanding the context of a word also helps, for example teaching "ON" through examples like "The cat is ON the table" and "I am ON time" and "We're ON!!," all of which elicit different reactions and associations.



#### Try this

The coursebook contains a list of vocabulary with general classroom objects. Enter the vocabulary into Twee and add a funny context in the "Topic" field – we used "Elephants eating lunch with tigers." You can choose the age group (here 9- to 10-year-old learners) and generate a dialogue using all the words from the list. Here's a snippet:

The elephants are sitting at the big table in the classroom. The tigers are excited to join them for lunch.

A: Can you open the window?  
I want to see if the tigers are coming.  
B: Sure! I'll open it for you.  
A: Look at the door! The tigers are here!  
B: I see them! Let's wave and say hello.  
A: The teacher told us to eat lunch quietly.  
B: I think the tigers will be noisy!  
A: I put my lunch on the desk. What did you bring?  
B: I have bananas and some meat for the tigers.  
A: The blackboard is covered with drawings of elephants and tigers.  
B: That looks great! We should add more colours.



### G What are the most useful words to teach?

Words that occur often are ideal for vocabulary instruction. These high-frequency words cover a large portion of spoken and written language, and learning 1,000 – 2,000 high-frequency word families will enable your students to go a long way.

Teaching both function words (e.g. because, although, if) and core content words (e.g. food, house, work) helps learners build a strong foundation for comprehension and communication.

Emphasizing vocabulary that is relevant to your students' daily lives both increases the likelihood of retention and also provides opportunities for them to use these words in context. This approach helps students build a networked vocabulary.

Letting learners choose which words *they* want to learn adds the elements of self-determination and autonomy, which enhances motivation and engagement.



#### Try this

When working with a text, instead of having learners underline or highlight key words, have them be word sleuths instead and ask them to:

- Find their favourite word in the text
- Find 5 words they can't spell without peeking
- Find 3 words they don't know or would probably not use
- Find 2 words that have words they know in the word
- Find 4 words they think are super easy
- Replace 2 words with other words
- Close their eyes, spin the paper around, then put their finger on the paper – where their finger lands is the word they have to use in a different context or write in their notebook
- Find all the words with a certain pattern (e.g. “ing” words in English)

Similarly, play with dictionaries and have learners find:

- A fun word
- A word that's the same in their first language
- A word they do NOT understand
- A word they think sounds like a sound
- A really long word



### H How do I introduce new words to students?

The relationship between words influences learning. Closely related words (synonyms, opposites, lexical sets such as colours or professions) are more difficult to learn when presented together. Semantic similarity between words increases the learning burden; this is known as interference (see F and L).

When presenting vocabulary in lists, choose words that are seemingly unrelated to one another to facilitate retention. Grouping unrelated words has been shown to promote learning. You can also include different parts of speech in your word groups, so that learners can form sentences. The process of associating words can foster learning.

Using two or three brief activities from the list of examples below when introducing a word strengthens memory connections in learners – enabling them to progress from shallow to deep learning.

While the evidence on whether gestures or images are better for learning is inconclusive, studies show that multimodal learning is beneficial. For this reason, a combination of techniques should be used to introduce new words.

Vocabulary learning takes time, practice, and repeated exposure to the target language. It's important to remember that introducing vocabulary in multiple ways is only the start.

What's all in a word?!  
Vocabulary learning and teaching



#### Try this

What to do when learners ask  
“Sie, was heißt...?”

- Have them get up and get a dictionary
- Point to an object
- Act the word out
- Show a relationship to the word (e.g. lion, animal)
- Describe a past situation: “Remember when...”
- Define the word / say what it is like / give an example
- Say what the word is not
- Give an opposite
- Describe the word
- Embed it in a context
- Give a translation
- Look at the list of examples below for more ideas

#### Try this

Give your learners a random list of words, e.g. apple / dunk / beautiful / gracefully.

Give them 2 minutes to make a sentence.

Rank the sentences made in class from the most fun to the most serious.

Example: *It was a beautiful day, and I was gracefully eating an apple at a café when a stranger dunked their donut into my coffee!*



## Examples of how to introduce new words

Here are some examples of specific techniques and teacher language you can use when introducing new words.

Teacher language	
Example word: <i>cozy</i>	Example word: <i>unfortunately</i>
Form	
How it's pronounced	It's almost like nosy! Everybody say "cozy." Say it 5 times really loud! Now really soft!
How it's spelled	Everybody, after me, let's spell it! C – O – Z – Y! Now write it in your notebooks. Now write it in the air! Now write it on someone's back!
Which word parts are in the word (prefix, base, suffix)	Un....what else has an "un" in it? What does that mean? Fortune! So lucky! Tell us when you have been fortunate!
Meaning	
Definitions	This means "comfortable and snug."
Concepts associated with the word	Here's an example: When I'm home on my sofa wrapped in a blanket, I feel cozy. When do you feel cozy?
Synonyms or other words associations	Other words are "safe" and "comfortable"
Use	
How the word is used in a sentence (grammatical function in a sentence)	It's an adjective. We often say something "feels cozy."
What collocations the word has	Here are some examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a cozy (little) [apartment, house, home]</li> <li>• a cozy [couch, bed]</li> <li>• has a (very) cozy [atmosphere, feel, air]</li> <li>• a cozy [restaurant, town, spot, corner]</li> </ul>
When and where the word is used (register, appropriacy and frequency)	It's a rather specific word, used more in the winter than the summer!
	It's an adverb. We often start sentences with this – Unfortunately, I forgot my keys, so I cannot get into my apartment!
	This is how you use it: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unfortunately not</li> <li>• unfortunately for you</li> <li>• unfortunately [at his age, in her condition]</li> <li>• unfortunately, the [rules, laws, regulations] say</li> </ul>
	You use it to be polite, e.g. "unfortunately, I cannot attend"



## I Should I teach vocabulary as single words or as “chunks”?

There are several terms for groups of words that often appear together - such as formulaic speech, multi-word expressions, collocations, and chunks. In this text, we use the term "chunks".

Both single words and chunks are essential for vocabulary development. The key to fostering learning is knowing when to focus on which aspect.

Many chunks derive their meaning from the individual words they contain. Understanding these individual words can make it easier to learn and remember the chunk as a whole. For example, “a bite to eat” makes more sense when learners are familiar with the meanings of both “bite” and “eat.”

Some chunks cannot be understood solely on the basis of their individual words. For example, the phrasal verb “turn up,” meaning “to arrive,” has little to do with the literal meaning of “turn.” This is why these kinds of expressions should be taught as chunks rather than in isolation.

When playing vocabulary games, it's important to consider that the functional language around the game can be just as important as the target words, for instance in a “name that object” activity, you might also include “That's right” or “That's wrong” or in a dice game you might teach “It's my turn!”

### When to teach single words:

- For words with clear, specific meanings (e.g. concrete nouns like *table, rain* and common verbs like *jump, eat*).
- For word families to help learners recognize related words (e.g. *act → actor, active, activity*).
- For scientific or technical terms that have precise meanings (e.g., *photosynthesis, austerity*).

### When to teach chunks:

- For fluency development to help learners sound more natural (*make a decision, take a break*).
- For phrasal verbs and idioms that often have unpredictable meanings (*give up, put off*).
- For functional language to improve communication skills (*Would you mind if...? Thank you!*)
- For academic and professional writing to enable precise phrasing (*in contrast to, plays a significant role in...*).



### Try this

Have learners guess which story these expressions are from.

Once upon a time  
covered in  
into the world

little pigs  
need to  
lived with

green meadow  
waved goodbye  
one day

(Answer: “The Three Little Pigs”: “Once upon a time, there were three little pigs who lived with their mother in a green meadow covered in flowers and grass. One day the mother pig said to the three little pigs, ‘You need to go out into the world and make your own way.’ So, they waved ‘goodbye’ and out into the world they went.”).

Have the learners guess which story, then let them recreate the text. You can show the expressions in the same order as the text, or mix them up for added complexity. Then give each learner a different story and have them select expressions and chunks of language for their classmates to guess which story they have.



## J Should I provide students with translations of words?

Translation is often criticized for being an indirect approach that takes time away from L2 exposure. However, many other ways of transmitting meaning, such as using pictures or gestures, take time away from the target language, too. In general, using the L2 in an easy-to-understand way to define or give examples of an unknown word in context provides more input in the foreign language.

Research suggests that L1 translations can be more effective than L2 definitions for learning L2 vocabulary, although this depends on a learner's prior knowledge and proficiency level as well as on lesson goals.

Rather than thinking of translation as a simple word-for-word substitution, it may be more helpful to see it as an elaborative process that strengthens connections to newly learned L2 words. It should be seen as a starting point that lays a foundation for using language in context.

Instead of providing word lists with translations and then testing rote learning, you can have your learners translate into their own L1. This fosters vocabulary retention and is one of many strategies learners can use.



### Try this

1. Have learners write a short text by hand (e.g. a description of a picture, a riddle) in the L2; writing first by hand slows down the process, and learners can't rely on autocorrect functions
2. Then have your learners type their texts into DeepL or Google Translate; when they enter their text into the computer, they have an opportunity to correct errors
3. Have the learners translate their text from the L2 into their L1 via the automatic translator
4. Have them correct the text translated into their L1, and then have them translate it back into L2 with the automatic translator
5. Learners then copy the new L2 translation by hand onto the same piece of paper as in step 1 and compare the original and corrected versions

In addition to slowing down the translation process, learners can compare different versions and learn from the automated translation.



### K How do I get learners to notice vocabulary?

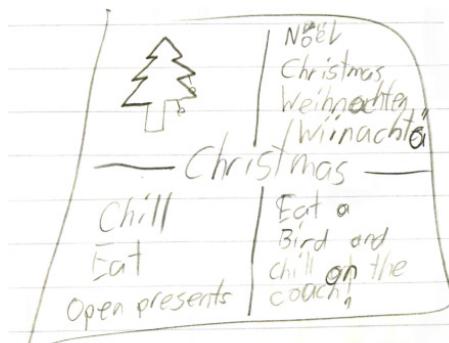
Drawing your learners' attention to specific language is a good idea. We've collected some suggestions on how you can do this:

- Instead of saying "Highlight the words you don't know," try one of the following: "Highlight 5 words you don't know, that you want to know better, that are not pronounced as they are written, that you like" or simply "Highlight 5 words." Then ask the learners to do something with them, there are plenty of suggestions in this handout. Each student can find different answers.
- Have students mark specific words in a text and let them continue working with the content. Then, a little while later, ask them if they remember which words were marked without looking at the text and invite them to speculate why.
- Have a word wall where you add words one by one, making sure often-confused words (there, their; what, when) and different parts of speech are in different colours; common words that are difficult to spell can also be noted on the wall. These words can provide the basis for playing games, for a brain break, and for other activities that are part of the regular classroom routine.
- Have learners take notes about a text or from a listening exercise and then use their notes to recreate what they heard or read.

#### Try this



Frayer cards make good vocab cards. Have learners write the target word on the other side of the card (here it's on the same side) and draw a picture, write the word in as many languages as they know, add actions related to the word, add associations to the word, or other options. They can test themselves and their classmates, not just on the word itself, but also on the related expressions.



### L How can learners practice vocabulary effectively and should I use lists?

How important is it to be "systematic" in terms of vocabulary teaching when there are millions of words and learners should have a choice in what they learn? Learning how to learn is valuable, and vocabulary training offers a good opportunity to teach this skill. Teaching and practicing different methods (lists, mind maps, flashcards) is beneficial and provides learners with models that may be useful throughout their lives.

Explicit instruction when learning words can be fun for learners, and it gives them a sense of accomplishment. However, all aspects of vocabulary learning – mapping, structuring, associating – should be addressed in lessons. For example, learners can memorize dialogues or a tongue-twisters, or they can record themselves reading out loud. These activities are more effective than memorizing words on a list.

Remembering vocabulary works best when learners have to actively recall the words – not just see or read them again. When students are asked to bring a word's meaning or form back from memory during an activity, the memory trace becomes stronger. Doing this several times, especially with breaks in between, makes the words stick even better. Teachers can help by creating opportunities for learners to stop and try to recall words during activities.

Coursebooks often list words together in thematic or semantic sets such as food items or professions. Such lists are often available online and through the coursebook publishers,

which can make teachers feel obliged to use them to meet the curricular requirements. However, it's important to consider that all learners have individual backgrounds (some may know most of the words already) and that the learning objective is competency-based (i.e. being able to talk about a topic rather than knowing a list of related vocabulary). Indeed, the aim isn't simply working through a textbook: the curriculum is based on skills, these skills can be built by using language in a variety of ways. This may mean that you don't have control over exactly what words students learn but this isn't a problem as long as they meet the aim.

#### Reduce interference when working with word lists:

- When working with sets or related words, present words individually and not all at the same time. Instead of teaching all the months of the year or classroom language at once, introduce the months as needed, even if it seems counterintuitive.
- Increase the distinctiveness of closely related items by teaching them in chunks. When introducing numbers, learn "three" with "wishes" or "five" with "senses," "ten" with "fingers."
- Use mnemonic devices to clarify words and expressions. For example, the word "picture" has an "i" so it's "in the picture", not "on the picture."
- Provide a context. To teach the difference between "hot" and "cold" make a sentence: "The sun is hot and ice is cold."

## Vocabulary practice and retention



### Make vocabulary lists more engaging:

- Copy the words from the unit list into an AI tool and ask it to write a dialogue on a topic for X number of people at the relevant course level (e.g. A2 or B1).
- A list can have several columns – for a translation into the language of schooling, a translation into another language, a picture, a definition, associations, model sentences, and other learning aides. Completing this kind of list requires a larger cognitive effort, which supports deeper learning. Later, learners can test themselves using the prompts in the different columns; this retrieval reinforces knowledge retention.

### Make space for a word wall:

- A word wall is a space in the classroom where new words are written in large print, with or without pictures. Learners can put words they are struggling with into an envelope, and teachers can integrate these into the word wall.
- Teachers can prepare a set of activities for learners to play when they enter the classroom as a classroom ritual (e.g. copy new words into their notebooks, scramble words for a partner, spell a word in the air and let their partner guess, guessing games).

### Use flashcards:

- Have learners make their own vocabulary cards (word on one side and translation, sample sentence, and/or associations on the other side). By using multiple cues, learners get more input and can test themselves through different associations, e.g. definitions, images, examples, and more. Online tools such as Quizlet have options for definitions and pictures.

What's all in a word?!  
Vocabulary learning and teaching

## M What are some classroom rituals that focus on vocabulary learning?

Replace weekly vocabulary translation tests with some fun, simple vocabulary activities to start or end a lesson, or to fill the time after learners have completed a task.

Choose a word of the day and have learners try to use it as much as possible throughout the day. Have them count how many times they use it and do a little review at the end of the day about the different ways it can be used.

Entering “I’m done, now what?” + “vocabulary” into a search engine will provide numerous ideas for posters with lists of quiet vocabulary learning activities for learners after they finish their other work.

Create a “vocab corner” with word cards and games (e.g. Battleship, Taboo, Scrabble, and Snap) for learners to play in pairs. It can be used as a station with the same games – just be sure to change the vocabulary every now and again.



### Try this

#### Vocabulary dice game:

Variations of this dice game are found on the *Babylonia* (Swiss journal of language education) website.

- Use your body! Act it out!
- Draw it with your eyes closed!
- Lip Sync – Mouth the word!
- Spell it with your right foot!
- Define it in a robot's voice!
- Sneeze!!! Use it in a sentence but achoo (bless you!!) the word so your partner doesn't hear it!

#### The Kim's game:

Learners use their flashcards or write words on a card. They then spread them out on a table and say each word or a sentence with each word. Then they close their eyes, mix up the words and take one away. They open their eyes and say which one is missing and make a sentence with the missing word, or they can define it. If you practice this activity in class, you can assign it as homework.



### N How can I motivate learners to study vocabulary for homework?

Keep in mind that you don't have to assign "memorizing vocabulary" as homework and that "learn vocabulary" is not a proper homework assignment. Practicing a strategy (e.g. "play the Kim's game on your own" or "create Frayer cards") can be useful. It's also important to remember that there are big debates around the value of homework and that homework assignments should generally have the following traits:

- Be clear and straightforward (so learners know where and how the vocabulary is used, e.g. for classroom dialogues, to raise awareness on language used in their community or on labels at home, or the role of the target language in advertisements)
- Be efficient (it's better to say "memorize this tongue twister" or "use these words to write a funny sentence" than "learn vocabulary"), learners should own it – you can help them take ownership of their learning by giving them choices
- Promote confidence (learners should not need help, so it's a good idea to practice in class what you want them to do at home, e.g. have them test themselves by using each word in a sentence in class, then assign the same thing for homework)
- Be visually appealing – learners can write words in a word cloud or create a shape poem at home

#### Concrete homework ideas to give learners

##### For sharing in class (to start the next lesson):

- Write a few definitions of words from the assigned text for classmates to guess which words are meant
- Create a mind map or brainstorm about an upcoming topic
- Write down questions or a vocabulary list after reading a text, and answer or recreate the text in class
- Prepare a gap-fill activity for your classmates

##### Strategies:

- Use a look-say-cover-write-check activity for vocabulary words
- Play the Kim's game on your own
- Try different techniques and report back in class on their effectiveness

##### Interactive activities (with a study buddy):

- Use your vocabulary list to create a skit and perform it in class
- Play a game (e.g. charades) with a partner

##### Outdoor and movement-based homework:

- Take a walk and list items that start with a specific letter
- Graffiti the pavement in chalk
- Write your words on cards and lay them out in your home, then take a walk and pronounce the words in the new place; try to visualize your walk later on



#### Try this

Have learners take a walk and take pictures of words in the target language - have them explore linguistic landscapes. This can be used for many fun activities in class.



### 0 Why does exposure to vocabulary outside the classroom matter?

Language exposure continues after learners leave the classroom. Switzerland is full of linguistic landscapes where multiple languages are present in signs, advertisements, newspapers, and more. This provides learners with opportunities to engage with language in real-world contexts. Research with English as a foreign language shows that language exposure outside the classroom supports learning, especially vocabulary learning; teachers can lasso this in by discussing students' experiences in the classroom.

Engaging with foreign languages outside the classroom also fosters self-directed learning, enabling students to take initiative and explore language at their own pace. Choosing movies, songs, or games based on personal interest also enhances motivation, making language learning more enjoyable and potentially sustaining long-term engagement – teachers can encourage learners to use these kinds of authentic materials.

Given time constraints due to the curriculum, learners often don't receive all the input they need in formal classroom settings. Language exposure outside the classroom is an important way to supplement formal learning.

#### Vocabulary learning through songs

Song lyrics resemble informal spoken language and usually contain many high-frequency words. However, listening to music doesn't necessarily lead to vocabulary learning, as it's possible to enjoy songs without fully understanding the text. That said, songs can still be

an effective way to learn vocabulary, as there is a lot of repetition (both within the song and by listening to a favourite song over and over again). And because learning vocabulary requires a deliberate focus on the words, reading lyrics while listening to songs and looking up unknown words are useful ways to create this focus; teachers should mention this to learners. Singing along or repeating phrases can also help improve pronunciation and promote retention.

#### Vocabulary learning through series and films

TV and streaming series contain high-frequency language, and watching programs with recurring characters, themes, and content can support vocabulary learning. Such shows use a smaller range of words and repeat them often, thus increasing exposure to the same vocabulary. Subtitles create a deliberate focus on words, and teachers can encourage learners to look up unknown vocabulary. Subtitles in the original (foreign) language are helpful for vocabulary learning once learners understand the language well enough. By contrast, captions in the L1 are useful to help very early-stage learners learn the most important words in the target language.

#### Vocabulary learning through gaming

Gaming provides opportunities to engage with language through narrative, problem-solving, and interaction with other players. It offers a meaningful context for learning English in particular, as players are naturally motivated to understand the language to progress in the

#### What's all in a word?! Vocabulary learning and teaching

game. The repeated exposure to vocabulary combined with its connection to on-screen actions can support learning. However, with advancements in AI, target language usage may decrease, as it's becoming easier to have settings in the local language.

Research in Northern Europe shows that children often acquire English through gaming before they start formal instruction, with frequent gamers generally having larger vocabularies. That said, the value of gaming for vocabulary development depends on factors like the type of game, the player's engagement level, and their pre-existing language skills. Also, the amount of language used in gaming may be limited and not always provide the depth of learning needed for fluency.

#### Vocabulary learning through reading

There is evidence that sustained silent reading increases vocabulary knowledge, provided learners already know almost all words of the texts they're reading. Teachers are advised to schedule a block of time per week for learners to read whatever they like for 5 to 20 minutes (depending on their age) at the same time every week. Teachers should also read during this time – as a role model. It isn't important if learners continue reading the same book or if they chose a different book each time.

There is some disagreement around whether graded readers ("easy reading" books) are more useful than authentic texts and what the right type of adapted text is. Learners also have many different interests, so no single book will appeal to all. Having a selection in the classroom and introducing a book club, reading buddies, or book discussions can all be beneficial for any type of text. Teachers can also ask learners to keep a list of unfamiliar words they encounter for some fun classroom activities.



#### Try this

How to support learning from songs, watching TV, gaming, and reading:

- Use subtitles strategically
- Encourage active listening and viewing: Suggest that learners read lyrics while listening to music or look up key words from a show they enjoy, and have them sing along or repeat phrases from their favourite songs to improve pronunciation and retention
- Assign focused activities: Ask learners to bring in unfamiliar words from their favourite songs or shows and work with them in class
- Combine natural exposure with explicit focus to help learners maximize vocabulary gains
- Encourage learners to play games with language settings in the target language
- Focus on in-game vocabulary such as instructions, commands, and storytelling elements, and review them in class
- Try watching part of a film and then reading an excerpt from a book in class – for example, watch Enola Holmes or Arsène Lupin on a streaming service and then read Sherlock Holmes or Arsène Lupin



## P Should I use vocabulary-translation tests?

While vocabulary-translation tests have traditionally been used in language teaching and assessment, their effectiveness, not to mention their alignment with modern language-learning goals, is no longer a given. The following points should be considered:

- **Alignment with communicative language teaching (CLT):** The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and all local curricula emphasize practical language use over isolated word knowledge. While translation can aid understanding and provide an initial connection between form and meaning, the ability to produce a correct translation doesn't fully reflect a learner's ability to use vocabulary in real-world contexts.
- **Scope of assessment:** Translation tests primarily assess recall but fail to address aspects such as connotation, form, pronunciation, and usage in different contexts. However, a well-rounded vocabulary assess-

ment should go beyond simple recall and also reflect a learner's ability to use words.

- **Addressing word meaning complexity:** Learners like to think that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words in their first and in their second language, but language is rarely that simple. Words often have different meanings, collocations, and cultural connotations that translation alone cannot capture. Learners must begin to understand that the representation of meaning is a more inexact, and more complex, process than they may think.
- **Challenges for multilingual learners:** For students who don't speak the school language at home, translation-based assessments can pose an additional challenge. Instead of assessing their knowledge of the target language, these tests may inadvertently reflect their proficiency in the language of schooling and bring about an uneven playing field.

## Q How should I test vocabulary?

While vocabulary-translation tests are quick and easy to grade, there are many other simple methods to assess vocabulary. Such alternative vocabulary assessments can also be used to measure reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, enabling teachers to see not just how well learners recognize words, but how well they know how to use them.

### Reinforcing and expanding past learning

- **Redo a worksheet from the week before:** If there was an in-class exercise that you thought was useful, you can repeat the activity. This unannounced repetition can offer a better idea of how well learners have retained the targeted vocabulary.
- **Changing modes:** Take a listening transcript done the week before and use it for a reading quiz (e.g. ask students to underline

What's all in a word?!  
Vocabulary learning and teaching

all the words that show someone is happy). Or take a reading text and read it out loud to use as a listening comprehension activity. Have students do the same or a similar exercise as they did in class.

### Traditional test formats as quizzes

- **Matching:** Have learners match words to definitions, headlines to text chunks, words to topics, words to pictures
- **Multiple choice questions:** Include options for synonyms, correct words, or definitions
- **Cloze/gap-fill exercises:** Provide sentences with missing words where the first letter or the number of missing letters is given, or use a word bank to help students fill in the gaps
- **Labelling/picture descriptions:** Use pictures from textbooks or other sources and ask learners to label them with the correct vocabulary words, short sentences, or captions
- **C-tests:** Create sentences with missing parts of words (e.g. "Tomorrow is going to b\_a great d\_\_!")
- **Sentence completion tasks:** "When you are hungry, you..."/ "In Zurich, there are..."
- **Editing tasks:** Provide sentences with incorrect words and ask students to correct them (e.g. "We normally go to zoo to buy apples!" should be "We normally go to the zoo to see animals.")
- **Learner-made questions and games:** Encourage learners to create their own questions (e.g. they read a story, and then write questions about it) and use these for quizzes and games
- **Observe:** Use games like dice games for performance assessments

The question then becomes "Do I actually have to test vocabulary" and the answer is that it may be important to think about assessing vocabulary skills more holistically. For example, vocabulary usage could be included on a rubric used for assessing another activity – to control whether learners choose the right vocabulary and use it accurately, and that they use a variety of words and expressions.

Knowing a word isn't all-or-nothing. Vocabulary is learned gradually: each time a learner encounters a word, their knowledge of it grows a little. This gradual learning matters when testing vocabulary because different tests measure different kinds of knowledge. For example, it's usually easier to recognize a word (receptive knowledge) than to use it in speech or writing (productive knowledge). Students tend to do better when the way they learned a word matches the type of test — reading for receptive tests, speaking or writing for productive tests.

Glow Strong aspects of your work.	Criteria	Grow How you can strengthen your work.
	You spoke fluently.	
	You spoke clearly.	
	You included specific vocabulary words and used them correctly.	
	You used a wide range of vocabulary.	
	You spoke in complete sentences.	
	You used simple and compound sentences.	
	You used linking words to connect the sentences and make the presentation more interesting. (first, next, then, also...)	
	Your presentation was entertaining.	
	You did your work and helped your team.	

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Please note: To promote readability, citations have not been used in this paper. However, each section (A-Q) has used multiple references, which are noted in the right-hand column of the reference list below.

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## Links

### Related Links\*

From "Try this", chapter B  
*How much vocabulary do students need to be able to use a language?*

- [Oxford Placement Test – this also has a Young Learners' version](#)
- ⊕ <https://elt.oup.com/feature/global/young-learners-placement/?cc=ch&selLanguage=en>
- [Macmillan, Pearson, Penguin readers all have placement tests for their books](#)
- ⊕ <https://macmillanenglish.com/level-test>
- [Cambridge has “Speak and Improve” and “Write and Improve” tools which also provide an estimation of the level](#)
- ⊕ <https://speakandimprove.com>
- ⊕ <https://writeandimprove.co/>
- [AI tools are constantly developing and some \(such as Twee or Cathoven\) use the actual CEFR databases.](#)
- ⊕ <https://twee.com/tools/cefr-level-checker>
- ⊕ <https://www.cathoven.com/cefr-checker>

If you are looking for lists of high frequency words, try searching for the following:

- [BNC/COCA and GSL lists](#)
- ⊕ <https://www.eapfoundation.com/vocab/general/bnccoca>
- ⊕ <https://www.eapfoundation.com/vocab/general/gsl/frequency>
- [Dolch or Fry site word lists](#)
- ⊕ <https://sightwords.com/sight-words/dolch>
- [The Oxford 3000](#)
- ⊕ <https://lingualeo.com/en/jungle/the-oxford-3000-wordlist-132154>
- [Cambridge young learners movers wordlist \(question C\)](#)
- ⊕ [www.cambridgeenglish.org › images › 149681-yle-flyers-word-list](http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/149681-yle-flyers-word-list)
- [Twee \(page 9\)](#)
- ⊕ <https://twee.com>

What's all in a word?!  
Vocabulary learning and teaching

### Projects

Would you like to know more about the related research project on vocabulary learning? Check out the project:

[Digital technology and vocabulary learning in vocational education](#)

⊕ [Go to website](#)

Want to learn more about other research linked to language teaching?

[Research projects at IOM](#)

⊕ [Check out the projects here](#)

\* Online resources were current at the time of publication.  
Links may change; if a link is broken, try searching the resource title or the organisation's website.

## Acknowledgment

We are grateful to Petra Buser for her valuable contribution to an earlier version of this manuscript. Her suggestions have helped shape the direction of this handout.

Freiburg | Fribourg, 2025

Published by  
Institute of Multilingualism

Layout  
Billy Ben, Graphic Design Studio

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