

Teaching Vocabulary



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There is no "right" or "best" way to teach vocabulary. The best practice in any situation will depend on the type of student being taught, the words targeted, the school system and curriculum, and many other factors. A number of principles, however, should be considered when developing a vocabulary component to a language course, some of which I'll outline here.

1. How many words and which words to teach

Research shows that learners need to know approximately 98 percent of the words in written or spoken discourse in order to understand it well (Nation, 2006). Reaching this percentage of coverage in written texts takes about 8,000–9,000 word families. The spoken mode requires slightly fewer word families, about 5,000–7,000. A word family consists of the root (*stimulate*), its inflections (*stimulates*, *stimulated*, *stimulating*), and its derivatives (*stimulation*, *stimulative*). Thus, each word family will have several members. For example, 6,000 word families equals about 28,000 individual words, and 8,000 families equals about 35,000 words. Of course, learners can cope with smaller vocabulary sizes than these, but if they wish to function in English without unknown vocabulary being a problem, then vocabulary sizes in line with these figures are necessary. The point is that students must learn a large number of words to become proficient in English, so teachers must help them learn as much vocabulary as possible.

The next question is which vocabulary to teach. The most frequent word families in English are essential for any real language use and are, therefore, worth the effort required to teach and learn them explicitly. Teachers often trust their intuition about which word families are the most frequent, but probably the best way of determining them is to refer to frequency lists, which have been compiled from language databases (called corpora) totalling 100-million words or more. Probably the best source is *Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English* (Leech, Rayson, and Wilson, 2001). Another way to ensure that high-frequency words are taught is to use textbooks which are written with the aid of frequency data from corpora.

An example of this is a textbook focusing on academic vocabulary, *Focus on Vocabulary: Mastering the Academic Word List* (Schmitt and Schmitt, 2005), in which my wife and I used an academic frequency list to decide on which academic words to include.

2. The importance of learning the spelling and pronunciation of a word

The first step in vocabulary acquisition is to establish an initial form-meaning link, which is what the vast majority of vocabulary materials and activities attempt to do. A common assumption, however, seems to be that learning the meaning is key, while the form element is either downplayed or disregarded. In fact, research shows that second-language (L2) learners often have trouble with word forms (Koda, 1997; Laufer, 1988). Words with similar forms, for example, are particularly confusing for students, especially words that are alike except for the suffixes (*comprehensive/comprehensible*) or the vowels (*adopt/adapt*). This problem is particularly acute if there are many other words that have a similar form in the L2. The word *poll*, for example, may not be difficult in itself, but the fact that there are many other similar forms in English (*pool*, *polo*, *pollen*, *pole*, *pall*, *pill*) can lead to potential confusion. Learners can also mis-analyze words that look transparent, but are not, leading to misinterpretations. The word *outline*, for example, looks like a transparent compound to mean "out of line," and *discourse*, looks as if it has a prefix to mean "without direction." It makes sense, therefore, to allot attention to learning form.

3. Taking advantage of the first language

There is no doubt that the first language (L1) exerts a considerable influence on learning and using L2 vocabulary in a number of ways. In terms of learner output, Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) found that nearly one-quarter of the errors in compositions were attributable to L1 influence. Learners also typically employ their L1 in learning an L2, most noticeably in the consistently high usage of bilingual dictionaries (Schmitt, 1997). Learners also strongly believe