

**(34) LEARNING VOCABULARY****How to find out how students learn vocabulary best**

<b>Language focus</b>	Helping students learn vocabulary
<b>Duration</b>	15 mins in class several times
<b>Materials</b>	None
<b>Assumptions</b>	Teachers do not usually offer their learners suggestions about studying vocabulary

**Many questions**

As a non-native speaking English teacher, what do you do when you have to learn a new word or phrase? Or as a native speaking English teacher, what do you do when you have to learn vocabulary in your foreign languages?

What goes through your mind? Do you think about what it looks like, what it sounds like, how it is related to other words you know? Do they have any semantic or morphological relationships? Is your new word related to words in other languages you know? Is it a helpful or misleading relationship?

Are you motivated to learn the word? Are you surprised that you don't already know it? Is it a word you'll find useful? Is it likely to go straight into your active vocabulary? Maybe it's a word that you only need when you are reading about or listening to the news, but you'll probably never use.

Who told you to learn the word? Where did you come across it? Was it on a list, on a diagram or in a text? Could you work out its meaning from the context? Did you need to check it in a dictionary? Did the dictionary tell you that the word has several meanings? And that it can be used in various parts of speech? Or that it is archaic or jocular or belongs to a particular domain? Is it a word that has a straightforward equivalent in other languages you know?

Is the thing tangible? Can you buy, open, lose, have, make or break it? Is it a feeling that you can have, share, expose, keep to yourself, dread? Is it an action that you can do or would avoid doing, or used to be able to do, or would like to be able to do, or that only specialists do?

When you as an English teacher ask your students to learn a new word or phrase, how do you help them? Is it your responsibility to help them? Is there any reason

not to help them? Do you know how to help them? Whose lives would be improved by knowing how to learn vocabulary?

## Things your students might do

On a scale of one to five, how much do you think the following things would help your students learn vocabulary? Your responses will depend on a number of factors, in particular, the level of their English. So, if you answer begins, *It depends*, say what it depends on.

1. Make a little story or dialogue with word cards
2. Label a picture of an aeroplane, a hospital, a hand, etc.
3. Copy some example sentences into their learning journals
4. Pay attention to the pronunciation
5. Study equivalents in other languages they know
6. Think about the structure of the word
7. Make a diagram of related words
8. Say the word and its paraphrase ten times
9. Watch yourself in the mirror while saying the words
10. Put a list of words in alphabetical order
11. Look up the origin of the word
12. Find words that rhyme with it
13. Add prefixes and suffixes to it
14. Perform or dance the word
15. Students test each other
16. Find out what other words typically go with it
17. Underline the words in a text
18. Find related words in a text
19. Think of words that could be used in the same context
20. Write out the word ten times
21. Copy definitions into their notebooks
22. Look for other examples of the same word
23. Put each word on a card with the first language equivalent on the other side

Could any of these learning processes be detrimental? What does detrimental mean? How are you going to learn this word?

## What works best for whom?

How can you find out which of these processes would be most beneficial for or detrimental to your students? How can you find out if helping them to develop learning strategies is better than not helping them? How can you find out how often students need to process words before they are actually in their long-term memories? What recycling processes can you recommend your students?

## Procedure

**Before the lesson:** Discuss these questions with some colleagues. Think about the consequences of not helping students learn. Think about why you would not share your experience and knowledge about vocabulary learning with your students.

Choose some ways of learning vocabulary from the list above and plan how you can introduce them to students.

- Step 1. Ask the students to think about your chosen approaches. They should choose some of them to try out. Ask the students to make some notes about their experiments.
- Step 2. A few lessons later, group the students who are working on the same approach(es) and have them make and present posters that represent their experience.
- Step 3. The students can choose other ideas from the list and repeat the process. This can be done several times.
- Step 4. At some point, ask the students to reflect on their learning. Has their vocabulary learning improved because they are focusing on how they are learning? Has it improved because they know more about what to take into consideration when learning vocabulary? If there hasn't been much improvement, why might this be?