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77

**Tips for Teaching
Vocabulary**

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Teaching
Vocabulary

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009074001

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First published 2022

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the XXX by the XXX

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-00907400-1 Paperback

ISBN 978-1-00907401-8 eBook

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Read this first

The content and aims of this book

This book consists of a series of practical tips on vocabulary teaching. Their goal is to help the reader/teacher in a variety of teaching situations to decide which vocabulary items (both single words and phrases) to teach and how, and which kinds of learning and teaching strategies are likely to work well – or not so well. Most of them apply to the teaching of any language; a few are specific to English. The tips are based primarily on my own teaching experience, but in some cases are supported by ideas I've got from other teachers or the professional literature, or by insights from applied linguistics research.

Of course, any particular tip may work for me but not for you: we each have our own teaching personality and preferences and our situations and learner populations vary widely. Please relate to the tips cautiously, as recommendations from a colleague rather than as directives from an authority, and adopt, reject or adapt them according to your own professional judgement.

Types of tips

Most of the tips recommend practical procedures or strategies that can promote good learning of vocabulary. A few, however, are caveats: suggestions to avoid teaching procedures which may not lead to good learning, in spite of the fact that many teachers and textbooks use them (e.g., 'Avoid meaningless copying or repetition of the new items'). Some of the tips are generic practical principles, like 'Practise a lot' or 'Teach new vocabulary both in context and in isolation'; others are ideas for specific learner tasks or teacher strategies, like 'Use *yes/no* worksheets', or 'Use pictures and realia'.

Using this book

Teachers: The book is not intended to be read through page by page. Have a look at the Contents, see which sections or individual tips interest you and turn to them first. Or flip through the book, skipping the tips that don't seem relevant to your own teaching and focusing on

those that are likely to be more helpful for you. Or if you are looking for a particular topic, use the Contents or Index to find it.

Teacher trainers/educators: Some of the tips in this book can be used as a starting point to provide student teachers with more substantial input on key research-based information: the use of corpora to establish frequency, for example (see Tip 44), or types, function and importance of **multi-word items (chunks)** (see Tip 4). Others can lead in to debates on more controversial subjects, such as the place of **L1** and translation (see Tips 27, 56) or the usefulness of **inferencing** (see Tip 49).

Materials writers: Many of the tips have immediate relevance for the design of coursebook components that deal with the teaching of vocabulary: in particular, those that deal with vocabulary selection and the design of enrichment and review procedures.

Added features

Research evidence: Many of the tips have footnotes citing research studies that support or give more information on suggestions made in the tips. A full list of these is shown on page 88.

Further recommended reading: A list of books and articles, grouped under topic headings, provides further information on some of the issues mentioned in the tips.

Glossary: A brief glossary explains terms that may not be familiar to the reader. Words appearing in the glossary are shown in **bold** in the text.

A: The importance of vocabulary learning

Vocabulary is the most important component of language to learn. You can communicate with limited grammar and less-than-accurate pronunciation, but you cannot do so without a lot of vocabulary. The more vocabulary a learner knows, the better they are likely to function in the new language.

-
- 1 Devote time to vocabulary teaching**
 - 2 Raise learners' awareness of the importance of vocabulary**
-

1

Devote time to vocabulary teaching

If learners have little or no exposure to the target language outside of class, they are not likely to pick up a lot of vocabulary just through reading and listening. It is therefore essential to devote time to deliberate vocabulary teaching in class.

A learner needs to know an enormous amount of vocabulary: at least five thousand words in order to cope with the needs of most communicative situations; much more if they wish to understand unsimplified texts and interact successfully in high-level discussions.

When learning our mother tongue, we acquired an extensive vocabulary incidentally: through listening and, more importantly, reading. But learners of a new language, particularly if they are learning in a country where the **target language** is not spoken outside the classroom, cannot do the same: their reading and listening outside class is likely to be in their mother tongue, and the limited amount of reading they will do in the new language, though important as a supplement (see Tip 73), is not enough to ensure they acquire the numbers of vocabulary items mentioned above.

We therefore need to spend instructional time on the deliberate presentation, explanation and review of new vocabulary: I would suggest at least a quarter of lesson time, and the same proportion of homework.

This does not, of course, mean simply taking a list of words and teaching them drily one by one! But it does mean:

- Drawing attention to the forms and meanings of new items encountered in texts (see Tips 43–49);
- Encouraging learners to write down new items and review them (see Tip 22);
- Introducing occasional new items for the sake of vocabulary enrichment (see Tip 52);
- Doing frequent vocabulary-review activities (see Tips 34–42);
- Including vocabulary tests in any periodic assessment procedures used during the course (see Tip 67).

Raise learners' awareness of the importance of vocabulary

2

If learners are aware of the importance of vocabulary, they are more likely to be willing to put in the necessary effort to acquire it.

It's worth devoting some lesson time early in the course to awareness-raising discussions, with the aim of getting the students to appreciate why it is so important to learn a lot of vocabulary in the **target language**. If they are not very advanced, then do this in their mother tongue (assuming they all speak the same language, which you also know). Such awareness-raising is useful for various reasons.

First, it's a good idea for teachers of any subject to share with learners their reasons for teaching the way they do. Learners need to feel they are active partners in the learning process, that they know what is going on and why they are being asked to do certain things.

Second, it cannot be taken for granted that learners will know intuitively that vocabulary is important: not even all teachers are aware of its crucial role in the achievement of proficiency. (It's far more important than correct grammar!) If learners understand why and how all this vocabulary-focused activity will promote their success in learning, they are more likely to invest effort in doing it.

Third, once we move beyond the fairly basic levels of the target language (A1/A2), learners will need to supplement the vocabulary they are learning in class with active learning outside it (see Tip 73). We need, of course, to teach as much as we can in class (see Tip 1), but in most courses the number of teaching hours is too small to ensure enough vocabulary coverage. Successful learning of new vocabulary outside the classroom depends crucially on motivation: and motivation in its turn depends on an awareness of the importance of such learning.

B: Selecting vocabulary to teach

If you are using a coursebook, this will often give you guidance as to which vocabulary items to teach, though you may find that you want to omit some and add others. If you are choosing your own materials as you go, then the choice of which vocabulary items to teach will be completely up to you. In either case, the tips in this section may help you decide which to prioritise.

-
- 3 Prioritise the most common vocabulary items**
 - 4 Include multi-word items**
 - 5 Teach word families selectively**
 - 6 Teach occasional idioms and proverbs**
 - 7 Teach basic texting vocabulary**
 - 8 Use published vocabulary lists with caution**
 - 9 Prioritise internationally acceptable items**
 - 10 Avoid introducing lists of words that are all 'the same kind of thing'**
 - 11 Teach useful classroom vocabulary early on**
-

Prioritise the most common vocabulary items

3

Learners need to acquire a lot of vocabulary, and the number of hours we have to teach it is limited. We therefore should not waste time teaching rare words that will not be very useful.

Particularly in the case of elementary learners, our priority is to get them to master the most common vocabulary items, in order for them to feel as soon as possible that they are able to understand and convey basic messages in the new language.

Many elementary coursebook units focus on sets of words like colours or parts of the body (see Tip 10), with the result that learners are taught relatively rare words like *purple*, *toes*, before they know common and essential ones like *just*, *thing*, and may not learn useful multi-word chunks like *of course*, *go on*.

Often your own common sense will tell you which items from the materials are likely to be more common and useful. If you want more objective criteria, refer to a **corpus** (a large database of naturally occurring written and spoken texts in a specified language). See, for example, corpora listed on the Brigham Young University site (englishcorpora.org), or the sources referred to in Tip 44, which can tell you how frequent any particular vocabulary item is. As a rough guide: words that occur within the top 1,000 most frequent words are probably appropriate for beginners, or A1 learners; those within the 3,000 most frequent would be appropriate for learners up to about B1.

I'm not suggesting, of course, that *all* the vocabulary taught at early levels needs to be taken from the lists of the most frequent items: items that are essential for the theme or situation being taught or for understanding a text, or ones we need for classroom interactions or that are relevant to the learners' culture – all these will necessarily be included in any interesting language-teaching programme. But we should not spend too much time on them; the common, useful items need to be prioritised.

4

Include multi-word items

Vocabulary is not just single words. It also includes items which are composed of more than one word, but convey a single meaning like a word does. Some examples are *by the way, more or less, look after*.

It has been estimated that at least one-tenth of the vocabulary we need to learn consists of **chunks** like these.

In many cases, these are *non-compositional*: that is, their meaning cannot be guessed by knowing the meaning of the component words and the grammar that links them. For example, you could not guess the meaning of *by and large* by putting together the basic meanings of *by, and, and large*. Very often such items can be paraphrased by single words: *by and large*, for instance, means the same as *generally*.

Even **compositional** chunks are worth teaching. First, even if it is clear what the item means, learners need to know, for their own production, that this is how the idea is idiomatically expressed in the **target language**. For example, ‘What’s the time?’ in English is the conventional way of asking about the time of day, rather than the equivalent of ‘How late is it?’ as in German, or ‘What hour is it?’ as in Spanish. Second, memorising a common **multi-word item** can help fluency: the learner doesn’t have to compose the phrase or sentence word by word, but can say the whole sequence straight off, confident that it is correct.

When choosing which vocabulary items to teach from a text, it is important to search for and identify chunks that occur within the text that it might be useful to draw students’ attention to; your coursebook may not identify them (see Tip 45).

A useful list of the most frequent non-compositional chunks can be found in Martinez and Schmitt (2012) (see the full reference below).

Schmitt, N. and Martinez, R. (2012). ‘A phrasal expressions list.’ *Applied Linguistics*, 33(2), 299–320.

It is sometimes taken for granted that it is useful to teach word families: to add other items from the same family when teaching any new word. For example, together with *act* we might teach *acting, acted, activity, action, inactive*.

Note that not all words learnt earlier are necessarily the most basic form of the word: learners are likely to learn *computer* before *compute*, for example. So teaching another member of the **word family** may in fact mean teaching a base form when learners have just learnt a **derivative** rather than vice versa.

Other words from the same word family may not necessarily involve a **prefix** or **suffix**. The new family member may look and sound exactly the same as the basic word you have just taught – but be used as another **part of speech**. For example, in English, when teaching *sign* the noun, we may teach that the same word can also be a verb.

Teaching word families is, in principle, a quick and easy way of expanding vocabulary based on words the learners already know. But we need to be cautious: not all the family members of a given word are necessarily useful to the learner or easy to learn.

- Some derivatives have little or nothing to do with the root meaning of the word: a nuclear *reactor* for example has no obvious connection with the word *react*, or with the prefix *re-* or root verb *act*.
- Some members of a word family may be rare and not very useful to most classes: if you teach *proportion*, it is probably not a good idea to also teach *disproportionately*.

Bottom line: if you are going to teach other members from the same family as a new word, then focus on the most common and useful ones, with clear links to the meaning of the original word. Don't feel you need to teach them all.

There is a common belief that idioms (like *the best of both worlds* in English) are a common feature of the speech of native speakers – and that it is important to teach them. Neither of these ideas is true.

Idioms like *the best of both worlds* are very rare. This one, for example, occurs on average a little less than once per million words: about the same frequency as words like *scrutinise* or *evasive*, which we certainly would not see as useful items for any but the most academic level classes.

The same goes for proverbs: even an apparently common proverb like *better late than never* rates only 0.5 per million in frequency.

So why teach them?

- Because they happen to come up. If I find myself using an idiomatic expression like this, or encounter it in a text, then I'll teach it as extra enrichment.
- Because they are fun. Learners may enjoy learning the sometimes interesting, humorous or piquant idiomatic expressions that occur in another language.
- Because they may have cultural value. It is interesting to compare a proverb in the **target language**, with parallel, or contrasting proverbs in the L1, and explore the cultural implications.

Bottom line: I would not recommend teaching a whole set of idioms or proverbs for their own sake as part of the vocabulary syllabus, unless your class is very advanced (C1–C2). They are not common or useful enough to merit the time and effort needed. But teach occasional examples, for one or more of the reasons given above.

P.S. If you do teach an idiom, don't use pictures of the literal meaning (as opposed to the actual message) of the expression to teach it: for example, don't use a picture of someone pulling a leg to teach *to pull someone's leg*. If you want to use a picture, then use one that illustrates the communicative meaning.

The language of phone texting, using messaging apps, has developed as a genre in its own right, and has been extensively studied. Should ‘texting’ vocabulary therefore be part of the syllabus of a language course?

Some teachers would answer ‘no’ to this question: the language used in texting, some say, is an inferior shorthand, impoverishing rather than enriching language knowledge. Anyway, if learners need it, they will pick it up through exchanges with friends, they don’t need us to teach it. And they might start using such language in formal writing, where it is unacceptable.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that our learners today will need to be able to communicate effectively through texting in their new language as much as – maybe more than – they will need to be able to compose and understand emails. If this is so, then surely we should be supporting their learning of the vocabulary for such communication. Also, there’s the aspect of our credibility as teachers: we need to show that we are up to date with the development of the language and its use in modern genres.

In general, most of the vocabulary used in texting is similar to that of informal speech. Some differences specific to this genre are:

- Simplified spelling, (e.g., *nite* for *night*);
- Abbreviated or clipped words to save keying in long sequences of letters (e.g., *demo* for *demonstration*);
- Substitutions of single letters or symbols for full words (e.g., *u* for *you*, *4* for *for*);
- Initials (e.g., *asap*, *bfn*).

My own opinion is that there is a place for teaching such vocabulary, while making sure that our learners are aware that it is specific to texting and not appropriate for more formal writing. The selection of which items to teach is a more difficult issue: in general, choose the more common, well-established items that you use yourself, rather than very new ones that may not yet be widely recognised.