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## Vocabulary

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How did you learn English? Can you remember what it was like when you looked at a text and didn't understand most of the words? You have been through the process of learning thousands of words to get to your current level – thousands! It's worthwhile stopping and remembering how intimidating (exciting?) it feels when you are at the beginning of your journey of learning a new language, particularly if your native language is significantly different...

This is probably the situation a lot of your students are in – but how can you help them? Obviously motivation and other factors play a part, but what about more practical guidance in vocabulary learning. Wouldn't it be great if you could say to your learners: 'This is how you're going to learn all these new words.' Hopefully this workshop will give you a framework to say that!

**Over to you:** Look at the list of statements about learning a language and give them a rating from 1 (not very important) to 6 (very important). Discuss with a partner, then feedback to the group.

### Teaching vocabulary vs learning vocabulary

What's the difference? Well, you are the teacher and you're the one doing the teaching. You can create plans for what happens in the lesson, and guide learners outside of your classroom, but ultimately it's up to them to do what you ask them to do, and find out what works best for them.

There are, of course, tools and techniques teachers can use in the classroom which can greatly help with vocabulary learning.

**Over to you:** Take a minute or so to think about some of the tools or techniques which illustrate the way you present or teach new vocabulary. This may be something as simple as the way you present new vocabulary on the board. Discuss with partner(s) and then feedback to the group.

Some suggestions:

- Board work: how do you present new words? Maybe you have a special area of the board you write them on? Do you use different colours to highlight different features e.g. stress or pronunciation.
- Context: do you give lots of examples of new words?
- Collocations: do you show strong/frequent collocations (i.e. those which will probably be most useful)?
- Pronunciation: do you model and let learners practise?
- Review: do you revise vocabulary frequently?

### Learning vocabulary

We've just looked at some example techniques or behaviours which teachers are encouraged to use in the language learning classroom. Of course, as a teacher you can't learn the words for those in your classes, even though sometimes you might feel it would be easier to do so! For learning the vocabulary, or actually 'acquiring' the words, it is over to them... But your role in supporting and guiding them is still crucial.

We're now going to look at four principles related to vocabulary acquisition. The term vocabulary acquisition comes from the field of linguistics, and I feel it's a term which better describes the deep processes required for second or foreign language learners to incorporate new vocabulary. These four principles illustrate that depth.

#### 1. Cognitive depth

#### 2. Retrieval

#### 3. Association

#### 4. Multiple encounters

Note that these are not exhaustive! They are adapted but together constitute useful guidance for both teachers and learners. Let's look at each one in turn.

## 1. Cognitive depth

The more a learner engages with vocabulary, the more likely they are to remember it to use later. In other words, when learning new vocabulary, instead of just asking the learners to write a word down, get them to do more activities with them. It's not uncommon for learners to write a word down in their notebook and then never look at it again – or when they do look at it, wonder what it means! Spending more time 'exploring' and using words is beneficial.

## 3. Association

This is about words' relationships with other words and the situations they are used in. What context is the word used in? What other words are used in that situation?

Firstly, for example, the word 'corner' – for one of its meanings – belongs in a word family that could be called 'playing football'. It is beneficial if the learner has that association: 'corner' belongs to a group of words that are part of 'playing football', such as throw-in, pass, run, shoot, etc. Secondly, how it combines with other words, or collocates, is important – in this case 'to take a corner' or 'to take a short corner' for example.

## 2. Retrieval

It's not enough just to come across a word once and play with it... make sure your learners encounter the word again and again: make them retrieve it. There is evidence that as learners successfully recall vocabulary, they are more likely to be able to remember it to use it at a later stage. Try and space this retrieval too – not just the following lesson, but the lesson after that, a few lessons later, a few weeks later, etc.

## 4. Multiple encounters

Not surprisingly, more and more exposure to new vocabulary will help the learning process. You may have experienced learners in your classes describing a situation in which they learnt a new word in class, and then started to read it/hear it 'everywhere'. Making sure learners have plenty of opportunities to be exposed to new vocabulary will help create this pleasing scenario.

**Over to you:** Have a look at the list of activities and decide which principle(s) they relate to.

Many activities which follow these principles are activities which the learner can carry out on their own – often at home, outside of the classroom. It is worth spending some time on learner training in this area: make suggestions to learners about what they can do, get them to try a few different activities (e.g. using a notebook, using an app on their mobile phone, reading certain websites, using google, etc...) and ask them to say which works best for them. Different activities will work better for different learners.

## Learner training

It is worth spending a few minutes on learner training, particularly early in a course. For example, you might decide to encourage them to make a note of pronunciation features (e.g. sounds, stress) or word types (e.g. noun, verb, etc.). If you do this, it is worth spending time raising awareness of these features so that they understand them/can use them when they are recording new vocabulary.

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## Applying these principles to lesson plans

A lot of the activities we just looked at are the kind of activity which you would repeat throughout a course. For example, having a short vocabulary revision exercise at the beginning of each lesson. A lot of them can also easily be incorporated into a typical English language lesson plan. For example:

- **Extending an activity**  
Whenever you work with a reading or listening text, just ask learners to pick four or five words to remember.
- **Personalising an activity**  
Learners use key words from a text to write about themselves.
- **Building vocabulary**  
Learners use a few words from a subject area as a starting point and spend some time expanding their 'word families', for example.

## Practical tools to help with vocabulary learning

Finally, it's worth noting that there are an increasing number of tools available to help learners record or check their new vocabulary. These are just some examples – perhaps the teachers can suggest some more?

- **Google**  
Googling a word can be a useful way of checking on collocation, common use and frequency – not to mention spelling.
- **Anki**  
Anki is a programme which lets you revise vocabulary with flashcards that you create – neatly, it allows you to decide how often/soon to review a word or phrase.
- **Evernote**  
Basically, Evernote allows you to save ideas, texts, examples of language, recordings, photos, etc. on your computer, phone or pretty much any mobile device. Everything is synced, so a photo you take on your phone will also appear on Evernote on your PC. The easiest way to start is to download the app on your phone.

**Over to you:** You are now going to explore a part of the Premier Skills English website called *Player Interviews* and you will have the chance to apply some of the principles we have been talking about in thinking about how you can use it with your learners.