

Six Vocabulary Activities for the English Language Classroom

To improve their second language proficiency, English language learners (ELLs) need a solid knowledge of vocabulary. While a basic level of vocabulary will allow learners to communicate some ideas to a certain degree, better communication—whether in speaking/listening or writing/reading—can be accomplished when learners have acquired more vocabulary.

At times, not knowing a specific word can severely limit communication; however, in many cases a lexical lapse can actually stop communication completely. Our second language learners certainly recognize that insufficient vocabulary is one of their biggest frustrations (Green and Meara 1995; James 1996), but just how important is vocabulary *really*? What our learners have been saying all along—that they need more vocabulary—is more than a hunch; it is a fact. As a result, teachers need to know what kinds of classroom activities they can use to help their students gain new vocabulary. The purpose of this article is to present some impor-

tant aspects of vocabulary learning and introduce teachers to six practical vocabulary activities.

The five types of words and vocabulary learning

It is important to define what we mean by second language vocabulary. When we talk about vocabulary, we usually mean words, but what is a word? Most people think of words as single units, such as *cat*, *dozen*, or *reluctant*. However, these single words are merely one part of the vocabulary load that our students face. In fact, a “word” can be one of five types, namely (1) a single word, (2) a set phrase, (3) a variable phrase, (4) a phrasal verb, or (5) an idiom.

Type 1: Single words

This classification includes the bulk of the vocabulary of any language. To be sure, there are thousands of single words that learners must know. Schmitt (2000), for example, notes that second language students need approximately 2,000 words to maintain conversations, 3,000 word families to read authentic texts, and as

many as 10,000 words to comprehend challenging academic texts. Single words are the largest type of words and are used more frequently than other words.

By single words, we mean not only a word like *room* but also *bedroom* and *living room*. All three of these examples are considered single words even though living room requires two traditional words, that is, two collections of letters, to express its concept, while *bedroom* requires only one. (The actual number of traditional words in a vocabulary item reflects spelling conventions in English, not vocabulary.)

Type 2: Set phrases

Set phrases consist of more than one word and do not vary. For example, in the set phrase *on the other hand*, we cannot say *in the other hand*, or *in other hands*, or *in other fingers*, even though these options are semantically related.

Common set phrases include *now and then* (not *then and now*), the *bottom line* (not *the lowest line*), *ladies and gentlemen* (not *gentlemen and ladies*), and *all of a sudden* (not *some of a sudden* or *none of a sudden*).

Type 3: Variable phrases

While most of the components in variable phrases will stay the same, there is some variation, often with personal pronouns, possessive adjectives, or word order. For example, in the variable phrase *It has come to our attention that*, we can change the possessive adjective *our* to *my*. Likewise, the phrase *off* and *on* can also be *on* and *off*. Thus, if it has been raining intermittently, we can hear “it’s been raining off and on” as well as “it’s been raining on and off.”

Type 4: Phrasal verbs

A phrasal verb consists of two or three words with the first word being a verb and the second (and third) word a particle. Many verbs can serve as the verb in a phrasal verb, but common verbs here include *put*, *take*, *come*, *call*, *make*, *go*, and *get*. These base verbs are often mixed with nine different particles—*up*, *down*, *on*, *off*, *in*, *out*, *away*, *back*, and *over*—to form unique words. For example, the base verb *take* with these nine particles produces these nine phrasal verbs: *take up*, *take down*, *take on*, *take off*, *take in*, *take out*, *take away*, *take back*, and *take over*.

Because of their quantity and frequency, phrasal verbs are an especially difficult vocabulary item for ELLs. In particular, phrasal verbs are extremely common in everyday conversation. More problematic is the fact that each phrasal verb can also be *polysemous*, that is, each one can have multiple, very different meanings.

How problematic is the polysemy of phrasal verbs? A good example is the base verb *take*, which, as was shown above, can combine with all nine particles to produce nine new phrasal verbs. However, **each** of these new nine phrasal verbs is in turn polysemous. For example, consider some different meanings of *take off*:

- remove clothing (“He took off his sweater.”)
- succeed (“His career took off.”)
- gain altitude (“The jet took off.”)
- leave (“I’m going to take off.”)

Likewise, *take up* has at least three distinct meanings:

- collect (“I’m going to take up the exam now.”)
- occupy space (“The table takes up half the room.”)
- begin a new hobby or pastime (“I took up tennis when I was fifteen.”)

Thus, *take*, which forms part of at least nine phrasal verbs, has more than nine meanings, perhaps in fact as many as thirty.

Type 5: Idioms

All languages feature idiomatic expressions, and each idiomatic expression, or idiom, is a separate vocabulary item. A group of words is an idiom if the meanings of the individual words are different from the meaning of the whole phrase. For example, when a person *lets the cat out of the bag*, it means that the person has revealed a secret. There is no cat, there is no bag, and there is no cat in any bag. The words *let*, *cat*, *out*, and *bag* are all high frequency words, ones that might be covered in any basic or even beginning level English class. However, knowing the meaning of these four words does not prepare the learner to figure out the meaning of the idiom.

Furthermore, this idiom is a set phrase. If the secret is extremely important, we cannot

say *let the lion out of the bag*, nor can we say *let the kitten out of the bag* for a relatively unimportant secret. In addition, we would never say *let the cat out of the sack*, even though sack can be a synonym for *bag*.

Most phrasal verbs are idiomatic. For example, the phrasal verb *throw up*, which means “to vomit,” is not the simple sum of the meanings of *throw* and *up*. Likewise, learners are rightly justified in being confused when they find out that the opposite of *put on* clothing is not *put off* clothing. If the airplane *takes off* at the beginning of a flight, why doesn't the plane *take on* at the end? With idioms, logic often has no place.

Additional aspects of vocabulary knowledge

In theory, mastering vocabulary should not be so different from learning any other component of a language, such as grammar, spelling, or pronunciation. Vocabulary, however, is a special problem because there are multiple aspects of vocabulary knowledge that learners must master, including polysemy, connotation and usage, part of speech, frequency, and collocation.

Polysemy

One of the biggest challenges for ELLs when learning vocabulary is that most words—whether single words, set phrases, variable phrases, phrasal verbs, or idioms—often have multiple meanings. This polysemy is a real problem for ELLs. Some words have just a few meanings. The word *hammer*, for example, can be the instrument (noun) or the action (verb). Many words, however, have a large number of meanings. For instance, the word *table* can be a piece of furniture, a set of numbers or figures, the action of ceasing discussion about something in a meeting, or a descriptive word (as in *table scraps* or *tablecloth*). As discussed earlier, a phrasal verb such as *take up* can be polysemous, as in these examples: *take up the test papers*, *take up too much space*, or *take up a new hobby*.

Connotation and usage

The connotation of a word is its value, that is, the way native speakers view that particular word. Connotations of words can be neutral, negative, or positive. A neutral word simply

names the item without assigning a value. Negative and positive words have a value assigned to the word. Thus, *dog* is neutral, *mutt* is negative, and *purebred* is positive. Likewise, *child* is neutral, *kid* can be negative, and *youngster* is positive.

Connotation affects usage. For example, a given word may be appropriate for a formal talk but sound stilted in everyday conversation. Two or more words may mean more or less the same thing, but they have different connotations and therefore different usages. For example, *sweat* and *perspire* refer to the same bodily function. However, we rarely say that athletes perspire, and deodorant containers never feature the word *sweat*. Instead, we say that athletes sweat but deodorants help control perspiration.

As another example, let us consider the concept of “not continue to live.” The basic vocabulary item to express this concept is the word *die*, but we could also use the words *pass away* or *kick the bucket*. While we can say “I'm sorry to hear that your uncle died,” it might be more common, especially when talking with a known person and wishing to convey our sympathy, to say “I'm sorry to hear that your uncle passed away.” The usage of *pass away* is restricted to a speaker who knows the listener and who wishes to express sincere regret or sympathy. That same person would never say, “I'm sorry to hear that your uncle kicked the bucket.”

Part of speech

The part of speech of an unknown word can present problems. To use a word correctly in a sentence, ELLs must know the difference between four basic parts of speech: noun (*amazement*), verb (*to amaze*), adjective (*amazing*), and adverb (*amazingly*). In learning new words, nouns are probably the easiest part of speech to learn, followed by verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (Ellis and Beaton 1993; Atkinson 1975). Among nouns, Mackey (1965) notes that frequent, concrete nouns are easier to learn than less frequent, abstract nouns but cautions that even frequent, concrete nouns can be a problem because they may contain other factors of difficulty, such as polysemy.

Some teachers may assume that knowing one part of speech of a word allows students to learn all four basic parts of speech of

that word. However, in a study of nonnative-English-speaking university students, Schmitt and Zimmerman (2002) found that few students know all four forms of a word. In other words, partial knowledge of at least one form was the norm. Results also showed that learners tended to have a better understanding of the noun or verb forms rather than the adjective or adverb forms. The authors conclude that teachers cannot assume that learners will absorb the derivative forms of a word family automatically from exposure and suggest explicit instruction in this area of vocabulary, that is, morphology.

Frequency

Knowing a word can also mean that the learner knows the frequency of occurrence of that word. Though this aspect of a word may seem trivial, the frequency of a word is often cited as a major factor in a given word's difficulty. In fact, Brown (1993) claims that word frequency is probably the major component in word difficulty.

A given word may well express the concept that the person wants to express; however, that concept may have several possible names, some of which may be more useful to a nonnative learner because that particular word is more frequent. The rarer forms, though most certainly semantically appropriate, would make the speaker sound strange. For example, *usual* and *common* can be synonyms, but we say that "Smith" and "Thompson" are common last names, not usual last names. While *discard* and *throw away* are synonyms, it would be unnatural for a native speaker to say to a good friend, "I'm going to discard these books."

Collocation

Perhaps the single most important aspect of knowing a word for nonnative learners—besides the obvious synonyms for the word—is the collocation(s) of a new vocabulary item. Collocation (*co-* meaning "together" + *location*) is a word or phrase that naturally and frequently occurs before, after, or very near a particular vocabulary item. The challenge here for ELLs is not learning the word's meaning (or other previously explained factors) but rather learning which words are actually used with this word.

Let us consider the verb *squander*, which means "to waste" or "use unwisely." *Squander* is a transitive verb; thus, any noun in theory could follow this verb. Studies of an actual language sample, or *corpus*, are useful in revealing the most common collocations for words (Nation 2001). For example, the most common collocations for *squander* are *money* or *resources* (salary, \$1,000, inheritance), *time* (the morning, her vacation, a lifetime), or *opportunity* (chance or prospect). Thus, common collocations for the verb *squander* are money, time, and opportunity.

Another good example of collocation occurs with the verb *commit*. The basic meaning of *commit* is "to make" or "to do." Corpus studies reveal that the most common collocations for *commit* as a verb are types of crimes: *commit murder*, *commit suicide*, *commit grand larceny*, and *commit fraud*. Thus, *commit* does not mean just "to make or do" but "to make or do something negative." An ELL who learns that *commit* in *commit a murder* means "to do or perform an action" might attempt to make the following seemingly logical combinations: *commit a joke on someone*, *commit the housework*, or *commit a meal*. The problem—a huge problem for ELLs—is that *commit* does not collocate with *joke*, *housework*, or *meal*. Because of both the difficulty and the importance of collocations, McCarthy (1984) advocates direct instruction and practice in this area.

Important goals in selecting vocabulary activities

In this section, I draw on the second language vocabulary research explaining the need for learning tasks that emphasize language output (Swain 1993). The most successful vocabulary activities are those that allow students to accomplish three goals: (1) focus on the vocabulary, (2) experience multiple retrievals of the vocabulary, and (3) develop successful vocabulary learning strategies.

Goal 1: Focus on the vocabulary

Students learn second language vocabulary better when they "notice," or focus their attention on, the vocabulary (Schmidt 1990). If students read a passage in which a certain unknown word is present but not essential to understanding the passage, students are

less likely to notice the word, which means they are less likely to learn the word (Laufer 1997). Comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for the large number of vocabulary items that learners must master to improve their language ability. The input needs to be noticed so that it can become intake (Swain 1993).

To make sure that students notice new words, teachers can write them on the board for all to see. They can also keep a separate section of the board for vocabulary, or in classrooms where this is not possible, post a large sheet of paper or newsprint on the wall where new words are written. It is not a good idea to write down every new word; instead, teachers should write down words that they think are useful to their students. Teachers should focus on words that are relevant to their students' actual language needs, which may include actual communication or passing a standardized examination. Any teacher's goal is to select words that match students' real-world needs.

Focus can also be achieved by having ELLs mark key vocabulary in some way. Nowadays many textbooks have key vocabulary underlined or in boldface. However, if your textbook does not identify key vocabulary in some very visible way, then have your students underline or circle words that you indicate are important to know.

Goal 2: Experience multiple retrievals of vocabulary

Perhaps the single most important component in learning vocabulary efficiently is a high number of retrievals of the word (Folse 2006a). What does this mean? The simple answer is that learners must interact with a word multiple times. Rather than completing just one type of learning task multiple times, such as repeating a word, learners should interact with a word in different ways. These ways of retrieving a word could include matching words with definitions, asking themselves the meaning of a word, pronouncing a word, naming a word that is connected in some way (e.g., match *cook* or *food* with *bake*), or even simply spelling the word. Each link strengthens connections and increases learning success (Atkins and Baddeley 1998).

Goal 3: Develop successful vocabulary learning strategies

Teachers would like a list of three or four solid vocabulary learning strategies that work well for all students, but such a list does not exist (Folse 2004). Sanaoui (1995) found that the best vocabulary learners do not use a limited set of strategies; instead, she found that the best learners have a selected set of strategies that they use consistently. Thus, teachers need to acquaint students with a variety of strategies and encourage them to discover the strategies that they prefer. Teachers should continue to monitor students to help them become aware of their strategy use. In other words, teachers must train learners to develop their own set of strategies and employ them consistently. Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) provide a comprehensive listing of strategies for keeping a vocabulary list, using the word in a speaking task, or illustrating the word in some way.

Six vocabulary activities for the ESL/EFL classroom

Results from research on second language vocabulary clearly call for more vocabulary practice in classes, especially classroom activities that include the three goals of focusing, multiple retrievals, and developing successful learning strategies. In this section, I explain six activities that help learners focus their attention on the vocabulary, require learners to retrieve the forms and meanings of the new words, and encourage learners to identify and develop a personalized repertoire of specific preferred strategies for vocabulary learning. These six activities have been used successfully in several EFL settings with learners ranging from teenagers to adults.

Activity 1: Keeping a running list of words

Students remember a certain percentage of what they see and a certain amount of what they hear, but they will remember even more of what they see and hear. Therefore, you should make a list of vocabulary as you are teaching. Point out the words to focus learners' attention on the words. In addition to providing focus and multiple retrievals, writing a list also shows the students an example of keeping a vocabulary notebook, which is one of many good vocabulary learning strategies. It

is important for ELLs to see a model of what their notebooks could look like (Folse 2004).

Keeping a vocabulary list on the board is a good first step, but students are bombarded by all sorts of information all day long. Your job is to make these words memorable, and one way to do this is by doing something unique with the words as you teach them. These unique actions could include drawing the word, making a story about it, or even spelling it backwards. More common actions could include pronouncing the word, noting its antonym, or asking if anyone knows the word already. Let us look at teaching options when noting the two following words on our vocabulary list: *valley* and the *bottom line*.

When teaching the word *valley*, you could ask students what the shape of a valley is. They will indicate that a valley is shaped like the letter V. Thus, you might write the word with an extra big initial letter to indicate this relationship: **V**alley.

The idiom the *bottom line* is a good word to illustrate. Have students draw several lines, one on top of the other. The lowest line should be bigger or thicker than the other lines to indicate that it is more important than the other lines. Have your students draw an arrow to the lowest one and then label it “the bottom line.” Thus, learners have illustrated that the bottom line means the most important point or factor in a discussion.

Activity 2: Vocabulary cards

A very simple yet effective practice activity uses vocabulary cards that contain one question each. The teacher puts students in pairs or small groups, and their task is to discuss and solve the vocabulary question presented on the card. These teacher-generated cards can feature a variety of exercises, as seen in the following examples for the word *valley*:

Multiple Choice Exercise

The area between two mountains is called a _____.

- A. voucher
- B. valley
- C. wound
- D. wave

[Answer: B.]

True or False Exercise

A valley is a kind of animal.

True___ False___

[Answer: False]

Error Identification Exercise

All of the valley in that region are white in winter and green in spring.

Which underlined word, if any, is in error?

[Answer: The word *valley* should be *valleys*.]

Each card contains only one exercise. Write the questions in large enough print or font so that students can see the cards as they work in pairs or small groups of three or four students. This activity can and should be repeated, even with the same cards, because students will most likely be working with different classmates. This second or third practice with the same cards (but with different students) allows for multiple retrievals. It also allows students an opportunity to share their strategies for how they remember certain vocabulary. Be sure to allow enough time in between uses so that students do not remember the cards.

Activity 3: Ranking vocabulary items

In a ranking activity, you present the class with a list of six to eight items that they must rank according to some factor. For example, you could present cities that students must rank according to population, or historical events that students must rank according to importance. Choose a list of items that represent a theme that is meaningful to your students. Embed key target vocabulary in the activity, and put these target words in bold or underline them.

The following ranking activity practices quantity words in English, particularly different kinds of containers. First, have students write their own rankings by themselves. Then have students work in groups of three or four to discuss their rankings and then reach a group consensus on one ranking list for their group.

Ranking Activity

Directions: The following six items were bought at (fill in the name of a local store that all of your students know) yesterday. Use your knowledge of prices to rank these from the cheapest (1) to the most expensive (6).

- ___ a **bag** of chips
- ___ a **can** of tuna
- ___ a **box** of cereal
- ___ a **bunch** of bananas
- ___ a **carton** of eggs
- ___ a **pack** of gum

If you do this as a speaking activity, remember that there are actually two types of language needed for this activity (Folse 2006b). The language that is in the task is not usually the same language that learners need for the subsequent speaking task. Most teachers are good at identifying the language in the task. Here this includes container words such as *bag* or *box* and food names such as *cereal* or *eggs*. However, teachers should also consider the language that students need for the speaking task. Students will need such language as “What did you rank number 1?” or “No, I think that a box of cereal is more expensive than a carton of eggs.”

Activity 4: Vocabulary ladder puzzle

In this task, the teacher will construct a ladder of five words that all have the same number of letters. Within the ladder of five words, each word differs from the word immediately above or immediately below by only one letter, for example:

- cat
- cut
- cup
- pup
- pop

These five words are the answers for this word ladder puzzle (Folse, 1993, 113).

To create the puzzle, replace all of the letters with dashes to indicate how many letters are in each word. Each series of dashes are followed with a clue, as in the example below.

Vocabulary Ladder Puzzle

Directions: The five missing words in the vocabulary ladder all have three letters. Each word differs from the word immediately above or immediately below by only one letter. Use this information and the clues to solve the puzzle.

1. ___ ___ ___ My first pet was a ___.
2. ___ ___ ___ When I was shaving this morning, I ___ myself.
3. ___ ___ ___ Would you like a ___ of coffee?
4. ___ ___ ___ A baby dog is called a puppy or a ___.
5. ___ ___ ___ Let's ___ some popcorn! I'm hungry!

If students do not know one word, they should skip that clue and go to the words above and below the unknown word. Once they have the answers above and below the word, they can rearrange the letters to discover the missing word. In doing this activity, learners frequently talk about a word several times, thus producing multiple encounters with the word.

Activity 5: Vocabulary sentence auction

This activity works well for the whole class. In brief, you will auction sentences using previously studied vocabulary, and the students' goal is to buy as many correct sentences as possible in the auction. For this activity, you will need paper money and a list with sentences to auction.

The sentences can range from simple to complex depending on the level of your students, with key target vocabulary in capital letters, in boldface, or underlined. These sentences can be written on paper with one sheet given to each group of students, or the sentences could be written on a transparency and viewed on the board. Notice how the four sentences in the example work on a variety of levels of knowledge ranging from basic meanings to actual usage.

Example: Vocabulary Sentence Auction

1. An ITEM is a kind of rock.
(definition/synonym)
2. HOWEVER means sin embargo.
(translation for Spanish speakers)
3. CLUMSY has a negative meaning.
(basic meaning of word)
4. He drank two BEETS before dinner.
(sentence with usage)

[Answers: 1. incorrect, 2. correct,
3. correct, 4. incorrect]

Give students a few minutes to study the list and decide the best items to bid on. It is important to explain before and during the auction that there is no penalty for buying wrong vocabulary sentences and that there is no credit for leftover money.

The teacher starts the auction by asking for bids for item number 1. When the bidding appears to be nearing an end, announce, “OK, this group (point to group or say the student’s name) has bid (whatever the amount is). Are there any other bids?” If there are no other bids, slowly say “Going.... going.... Gone... Sold to (the group).” Give that group a piece of paper or a card with the sentence number on it, or write that information on the board.

At the end of the auction, announce which sentences are correct. The winner is the group that has purchased the highest number of correct items.

Activity 6: Scrambled vocabulary envelopes

This activity provides practice with collocations. In this activity, students work in groups of three or four to rearrange sentence parts into correct sentences.

Prepare a set of sentences that illustrate previously studied vocabulary in capital letters. Cut each sentence into pieces and put these pieces into an envelope. (For example, a sentence might be cut into three to five pieces.) Label this envelope as #1 and write the number of pieces on the outside of the envelope: “Envelope #1, 12 pieces.” This information does not indicate the number of sentences in the envelope. In the example below, the slash marks indicate possible places to cut the sentences. Notice that I have not used a capital letter for the first word or final punctuation.

Example: 12 Vocabulary Pieces for Envelope #1

during the review / SESSION yesterday,
/ the teacher CALLED / ON the
sleeping student

he LET / THE CAT / OUT OF THE
BAG / and ruined the SURPRISE /
PARTY

people who / COMMIT / A CRIME
often / END UP / in jail

[Answer: “During the review session yesterday, the teacher called on the sleeping student. He let the cat out of the bag and ruined the surprise party. People who commit a crime often end up in jail.”]

For a class of fifteen who are working in five groups of three, you will need approximately eight to ten envelopes. For a larger class, you will need to prepare a proportionate number of additional envelopes.

List the teams on the board in a grid with the envelope numbers at the top of the grid. Pass out the envelopes. Ask each team to first empty the contents of the envelope on their desk and verify that they have all the pieces. Then students try to reassemble the sentences. When they are finished, the teacher goes over to verify the sentences. The teacher only says “yes” or “no.” If yes, then that team puts all the pieces back in the envelope, gets a check mark on the board for that envelope number, and then takes another envelope. The winner is the team that completes the most envelopes in a given time period (set by the teacher beforehand).

Conclusion

English language learners need to increase their vocabulary knowledge. Given the time constraints of many learners, teachers should incorporate explicit vocabulary teaching supported by classroom activities that reinforce previously studied material. Such activities will help learners focus their attention on key vocabulary, require learners to retrieve the forms and meanings of the new words, and encourage learners to identify and develop a personalized inventory of strategies for vocabulary learning. Our ultimate goal is to help our students be active vocabulary learners after they leave our classrooms.

Note: For handouts on teaching vocabulary, see: www.keithfolsen.com/handouts.html

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Appendix 2 Some Commonly Confused Homonyms

The Challenge of Spelling in English • Eran Williams

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. are – our | 17. recede – reseed |
| 2. bare – bear | 18. rote – wrote |
| 3. by – buy – bye | 19. sew – so – sow |
| 4. cents – sense | 20. sight – site – cite |
| 5. course – coarse | 21. straight - strait |
| 6. council – counsel | 22. stationary – stationery |
| 7. except – accept | 23. their – there – they're |
| 8. fourth – forth | 24. threw – through |
| 9. herd – heard | 25. to – too – two |
| 10. hole – whole | 26. wail – whale |
| 11. horse – hoarse | 27. ware – wear – where |
| 12. isle – aisle | 28. write – right – rite |
| 13. know – no | 29. weather – whether |
| 14. led – lead (n) | 30. which – witch |
| 15. naval – navel | 31. would – wood |
| 16. principal – principle | 32. your – you're |

ANSWERS TO *THE LIGHTER SIDE* MIAMI WORD CRUISE

1. he; 2. hi; 3. up; 4. cup; 5. ice; 6. pie; 7. she; 8. sir; 9. cure; 10. epic; 11. heir; 12. hire; 13. pier;
14. pure; 15. rush; 16. chess; 17. crush; 18. issue; 19. price; 20. purse; 21. super; 22. usher; 23. crisis;
24. perish; 25. spices