

28 Vocabulary Teaching Ideas

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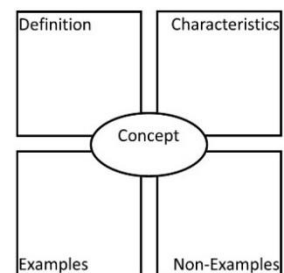
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1. Vocabulary Cloze Activities: Use vocabulary cloze activities to review key passages from a reading. One way to create a vocabulary cloze activity is to blank out target vocabulary in the reading passage, and have students work to fill in the blanks with information either from a word bank (less challenging) or from memory (more challenging). Vocabulary cloze activities can also be used to reinforce new vocabulary learning after a lecture, reading, or video. These activities have the double benefit of getting students to think about language (how words fit into the blanks) as well as content (which words fit into the blanks).

2. Vocabulary Dictogloss: Give students a list of target vocabulary from a reading passage. Then read the passage aloud twice to students. The first time, students listen and take notes of the main ideas. The second time, students listen and add in the supporting details for the main ideas. Next, they work in groups to try and recreate the passage as completely as possible. Students should use the vocabulary provided before the activity began. Vocabulary Dictogloss has the benefit of getting students to think about content (what ideas they should include in their writing) and language (how they should put down those ideas and incorporate new vocabulary).

3. Embedded Definitions: Provide meanings for words as you speak by explaining academic vocabulary and key terms within the context of what you are saying. Rather than simplifying your speech, you are enriching it with short definitions, examples, and familiar synonyms. The key is to make use of this strategy naturally and regularly so that learners have multiple exposures to the target vocabulary. For example, “Before you begin an experiment, you should develop a *hypothesis*, which is an idea based on what you know so far, but have not yet proven—a *hypothesis*.” “They all lived in a *hut*, a small house—a *hut*, beside the river.”

4. Frayer Model: A Frayer Model is a diagram with four parts. It is used to help students uncover the core definition of a key vocabulary item. The vocabulary item is in the middle of the chart, with essential characteristics, examples, non-examples, and the definition in the corners. Students work together to complete the chart, and then develop a definition. Frayer models can be great warmers, reviews for a previous lesson, or closers that demonstrate learning. They are useful when there can be multiple interpretations of a concept’s meaning.



5. Vocabulary Repetition: When a key word comes up while you are talking, you can have the class repeat the word aloud in unison after you’ve pronounced it for the class. The repetition will help to anchor the pronunciation for students and serve to highlight the word’s importance so that it gets noticed. It only takes a couple of seconds for everyone in class to repeat a term such as “thermodynamics” or “circumstances.” At the same time, you can write the words being practiced on the board so that students can see how the spelling relates to the pronunciation. Even advanced learners can enjoy this brief vocabulary reinforcement activity.

6. Lateral Listening: Sometimes, students focus mostly on listening to the teacher and not to each other. You can encourage students to listen to each other by asking follow up vocabulary questions such as “Hyun-jun, can you remind the class of the definition for one of the new words Stanley used?” or “Fatima, do you agree with definition Yumi gave us? Why or why not?” or “Vinh, can you add to Sarah’s definition?” During a discussion, you can also have students write down vocabulary questions to ask other students as they listen to their classmates’ ideas, and then provide time for students to ask their questions to each other.

7. Previewing Based on Frequency: Extract what you think are important vocabulary terms from an upcoming lesson and introduce them based on how frequently people use them. You can focus on high frequency words first that students will encounter more often. These words might be from a list of 2,000 high frequency word families in English (Tier 1 Words), or general academic words (Tier 2 Words) that cross disciplines (such as words in the Academic Word List). Next, you can focus on lower frequency words that are discipline specific and key for content understanding (such as technical terminology). Tools such as the vocabulary profilers on www.lex tutor.ca can help you determine which words to teach based on their frequency.

8. Vocabulary Splash Previews: Before a lesson, you can show students from 12 to 20 important vocabulary words that they will encounter. You can do this on the board or with PowerPoint, etc. Ask students to look over the words and work in pairs to make a list of five words they are unfamiliar with in connection to the lesson topic. Once each pair has five words, you can elicit five words from the class as a whole. Then you can explain those five words briefly before beginning the lesson. This will help to heighten students’ awareness of the new words they will be encountering during the lesson as well as activate their background knowledge.

9. Recycling and Spiralling: Intentionally repeat key vocabulary at certain points during a course. This naturally reintroduces words during a series of lessons, and it gives students the many times (around 8 to 10 encounters for passive knowledge) they need to see or hear something in order to learn it. Increase the time between exposures as the course progresses. Recycling also helps students make connections between previous lessons and current lessons. Spiralling increases the cognitive challenge while revisiting and reinforcing previously taught vocabulary. For example, early in the semester students may be matching definitions, but later in the semester, they are encouraged to write sentences with accurate word formation and collocations.

10. Reviewing the Previous Lesson: Take a minute or two at the start of class to review vocabulary from the previous lesson. This review will help to link the topics for students and recycle vocabulary. Activities can be as simple as having students work in pairs to remind each other of the previous lesson’s vocabulary. Another idea is to have a graphic organizer (such as a t-chart outlining the two sides of an issue) that students complete with a partner using key vocabulary from the previous lesson. If you have an essential question that guided a previous lesson topic, students can discuss answers to that question using the previous lesson’s key vocabulary.

11. Student Glossaries: Have students keep their own personal glossaries of key terms and vocabulary during the course. Students can add terms to their glossaries during class or while they are studying. Students can organize their glossaries either alphabetically or by topic. In addition to English definitions, students might include parts of speech, pronunciation guides, synonyms, antonyms, collocations, illustrations, translations, and sample sentences. With personal glossaries, students become lexicographers, creating their own personal dictionaries for later reference. Give students regular time to work on their glossaries so they become a habit.

12. Vocabulary Question Preparation Time: Without time to prepare, asking the class if there are any questions about vocabulary might not result in many good questions. Take time in class to let students review their materials to think about the new vocabulary they encountered and what questions they might still have about that vocabulary. Students can then work in small groups to compose questions they have about that day's vocabulary. Once students have a list of four or five questions, they can identify their most important question. Finally, students can choose a spokesperson from each group to ask the most important question from their list.

13. Using the Board: In addition to using a PowerPoint or other kind of presentation, use the board as you teach to make note of key vocabulary. Using the board will naturally slow down the speed of your delivery to facilitate note taking. Students will also be more likely to write down these vocabulary words in their notebooks because putting them on the board emphasizes their importance. You might also take this opportunity to provide a very brief definition or common synonym before moving on. Good board work can help students to follow along in a lecture and associate spelling and pronunciation with new vocabulary.

14. Vocabulary Comprehension Checks: Rather than asking students if they understand a vocabulary word, you can check learning by having students work in groups define new vocabulary words, use them in a topic related sentence, and then share what they have learned so far. You might also have low-stakes mini-quizzes interspersed throughout the class or a course to check vocabulary learning. If your institution uses clickers (or students have an app on their phone), you can take advantage of those to get a quick pulse on student understanding. Once you have identified words students still haven't mastered, you can work on those during class.

15. Learner Dictionaries. Allow students to use student-friendly dictionaries in class and during assessments. Examples of learner dictionaries include the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, and the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Typically, learner dictionaries use high frequency vocabulary to define words in a way that is comprehensible for English language learners. If you have a variety of dictionaries available (paper, electronic, and online), you can have students work in teams to compare the definitions of words in different dictionaries, and then choose the dictionary that is most useful for language learning.

16. Word Walls. Have a wall in the classroom where key vocabulary related to the course content is posted for all students to see. Students can add to the wall when they find a particularly useful term or word they are curious about. Word walls can also make a useful exit ticket from class. As students leave, they can put up new, challenging, or interesting words onto the word wall. The most common words can be gathered together for later vocabulary practice. If you don't have access to a physical classroom wall, you can explore creating a virtual wall online.

17. Jig-Saw Vocabulary: Jig-saw activities break a reading down into parts. Groups of students each read one section of a text and identify key vocabulary. Then they work together to solidify their understanding of that section and its key vocabulary. Next, the original groups break up and reform with new partners. Each group now contains students who have read different parts of the text. They tell each other about their sections of the text and explain two or three key words from their particular sections. Once students have an understanding of the entire text, they go back to their original groups to compare what they have learned and make note of new words.

18. Vocabulary Pass Around: Create a graphic organizer with a topic in the middle, and six to twelve related vocabulary words surrounding the topic. Each student receives a graphic organizer and has one minute to write a short definition beside ONE of the vocabulary words. Then have students pass their graphic organizers to the person beside them. Students quickly check what has been done so far, and add a missing definition to the new graphic organizer. Students continue passing the graphic organizers until all of the vocabulary words have a definition. Adaptations: Students draw a picture or write a sample sentence. This activity makes a great review for previously learned vocabulary.

19. Vocabulary "Blackboard" Bingo: At the start of a lesson, put up around 20 words from the lesson on the board, or create a PowerPoint slide. Have a mix of words students may and may not know. Students choose five words they think are interesting and write them down. Next, call out random words from the board one at a time. When students hear one of their words, they put a check mark beside it. The first student to check mark all five words shouts "Bingo!" Students can now work in groups to predict what the lesson will be about. This activity helps students notice upcoming vocabulary words and activate their background knowledge.

20. "Old School" Vocabulary Bingo: Distribute blank bingo cards and ask students to fill in the cards with the vocabulary you can currently studying (from the previous week or from a unit of instruction). Provide students with a word bank from which to choose their words. The teacher then calls out definitions, synonyms, antonyms, or acts out words and students mark off the corresponding words. The first student to mark off all of their words shouts "Bingo!" Extension: Students can compose sentences with the winning words.

21. Vocabulary Memorization Analysis: Create a slide with around 25 key terms from a unit of study. Let students know they will be working silently alone to memorize as many words and phrases as possible without writing anything down. Show the slide for two minutes. Afterwards, students work for two minutes to write down as many words as possible. They count their words, and then work with a partner for two minutes to enlarge their list. They count their words again, and work in groups of four to enlarge their list. Finally, you can show the original slide. Students can discuss their memorization techniques. This activity can be a great preview or review.

22. Vocabulary Exit Tickets: At the end of class, give each student an index card. Students write their names on the cards along with a word from that day's lesson that they found challenging. As they leave, students hand in their index cards. The next day, redistribute the cards to different students. Students can look up the words on the cards, and then provide a definition, draw a picture, make a sample sentence or give a translation on the back. Students return the cards to the original owners. By the end of the semester, students have a full set of index cards they can use as flash cards to review challenging vocabulary.

23. Vocabulary Knowledge Splash: Create a vocabulary splash with 12 to 15 upcoming vocabulary words from the day's lesson. Students work in pairs to discuss and make a list of the words they already know from the splash. If students know a word their partners do not, they take time to explain those words as best they can. Students can also try to orally create sentences using the words they know. Once students have identified the words they know, you can elicit some words and explanations from the class. This activity creates a knowledge framework for students to add new vocabulary learning, as well as prepares them for the day's upcoming topic.

24. Vocabulary Concordances: Provide students with five or six sentence extracts with the target word in bold and an equal number of words on either side. Websites, such as www.lex tutor.ca, have concordance tools to help find sample sentences. Students then examine the target words and try to work out their meanings based on the context. This activity can also be done orally, with the instructor saying several example sentences, each using the target word. Tip: If students are having trouble coming up with a definition, they can try replacing the target word with another familiar word they already know that works in all of the examples.

25. Extensive Reading: If a reading text is not too challenging, students can start to learn vocabulary from context. A rule of thumb is that there should be no more than about two unknown words in every 100 words of text. Large amounts of reading is key. Extensive readers, such as Penguin Readers or Oxford Bookworms, can help students reach a goal of reading one or two books per week. Students can try guessing the meaning from context of an unknown word by substituting it with a familiar word or translation, reading on for a possible synonym or definition, looking at familiar parts of the word, or continuing reading to get more context.

26. Concept-Definition Maps: Students make a graphic organizer with the vocabulary target in the middle and three questions around the outside—What is it? What is it like? What are some examples? Students then work together to answer the questions and complete the graphic. They might use their textbooks, dictionaries, and the internet to help them find the answers to their questions (Idea from Reiss, 2012: *120 Content Strategies for ELLs*).



27. Word of the Day: Introduce a new word every morning along with its definition. It should be a Tier 2 vocabulary word that is used across school subjects. When students use the word of the day correctly, they can receive recognition and/or bonus points. The teacher should also try to use the word of the day as much as possible in a natural way. When students hear the word of the day, they can signal understanding with a nonverbal signal, such as a thumbs up. Sometimes the word of the day might be a previous word of the day to recycle vocabulary and reinforce learning.

28. Vocabulary Board Review Game: Put around 20 vocabulary words the class had studied onto the board. Divide the class into two, three, or four teams and have them line up in front of the board. The students at the front of each line should stand with their backs to the board so that they can't see the vocabulary words. The rest of the students should be facing the board. The teacher then points to one word on the board. The students in line give the definition (or synonyms) of the word to their team member at the board. The first student to point to the correct word gets a point for their team. The students at the board then go to the back of their lines and the next students take their place. Continue until everyone has had a turn.

References and Further Reading:

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