SYSTEMS · VOCABULARY

TEACHING VOCABULARY

What it means to know a word, what research tells us, and how to teach vocabulary

AT A GLANCE

What it involves	helping learners understand, remember and use words and multi-word items: their form, meaning and use
Teaching vocabulary means	choosing useful items, clarifying them in context, and helping learners meet, retrieve and use them again and again
Plan it with	the **Presentation – Practice – Production**, **Test – Teach – Test** and **Task-Based Learning** frameworks
Tools	the **Language analysis sheet** and **Vocabulary map** in the appendices

What is vocabulary?

Vocabulary, or **lexis**, is not just single words. It includes any item that carries a single meaning, from one word to a whole phrase. Teachers often call these **lexical items**.

Type	Examples
Single words	*chair, play, beautiful*
Compounds	*shopping centre, bus stop, sunglasses*
Phrasal and prepositional verbs	*give up, look after, put up with*
Collocations	*make a mistake, heavy rain, deeply disappointed*
Fixed and semi-fixed expressions	*by the way, all of a sudden, I'd rather..., Have you ever...?*
Idioms	*break the ice, a piece of cake*

Much of what proficient speakers say is made of these ready-made **chunks**. Lewis (1993) argued that language consists of "grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar": learning chunks helps learners speak more fluently and accurately. This links vocabulary closely to grammar and functional language (see the **Grammar** and **Functional Language** handouts).

Receptive and productive vocabulary

Learners can recognise and understand far more words (**receptive** vocabulary) than they can use (**productive** vocabulary). Not every new word needs to become productive: decide which items learners need to **use**, and which they only need to **recognise** when reading or listening.

What it means to know a word

Knowing a word involves much more than knowing its meaning. Nation (2013) describes word knowledge in terms of **form**, **meaning** and **use**. Here is what it involves for the word *analysis*.

FORM	MEANING	USE
Spoken: /əˈnæləsɪs/, stress on the second syllable **Written:** *analysis*; plural *analyses* **Word parts and family:** *analyse, analyst, analytical*	**Definition:** a detailed study or examination of something in order to understand it **Concept:** careful, detailed, systematic **Connotation:** neutral **Related words:** *examination, study, evaluation*	**Word class and grammar:** countable noun; *an analysis of something* **Collocations:** *carry out / do an analysis; a detailed / careful / in-depth analysis* **Register and frequency:** neutral to formal; very common in academic and professional texts

Based on Nation (2013)

Knowing what *analysis* means isn't much use if learners don't know which verbs to use with it (*do* or *carry out*, not *make*) or how to pronounce it. Depending on your aims, clarify the aspects learners will need, not just the meaning and spelling.

What research tells us

- **A small number of words does most of the work.** The most frequent 2,000–3,000 word families make up the large majority of the words in everyday texts, so they deserve most teaching time. Understanding an authentic text without help requires a much larger vocabulary: around 8,000–9,000 word families for written texts and 6,000–7,000 for spoken texts (Nation 2006).
- **Repetition matters.** Learners usually need many encounters with a word, often around ten or more, before they know it well (Webb 2007).
- **Spaced retrieval works.** Recalling a word from memory, at increasing intervals, helps learners remember it far better than simply seeing it again (Nation 2013).
- **Deeper processing helps.** Tasks that make learners think about a word, decide how to use it and use it themselves lead to better learning than tasks that only expose them to it (Laufer & Hulstijn 2001).
- **Both incidental and deliberate learning are needed.** Learners pick up vocabulary incidentally from reading and listening, but slowly. Deliberate study and teaching speed up the process (Webb & Nation 2017).
- **Similar words can interfere.** Teaching closely related words together, such as opposites (*left / right*) or a set of near-synonyms, can cause confusion. Words linked by a theme or story (*hotel, check in, reception, key*) are easier to learn together (Tinkham 1993; Nation 2013).

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR TEACHING

- Prioritise high-frequency and useful items.
- Teach words in context, and teach chunks and collocations, not just single words.
- Recycle vocabulary regularly, and ask learners to recall it, not just see it.
- Get learners to use new words meaningfully and personally.
- Combine teaching with lots of reading and listening outside class.

Choosing vocabulary to teach

You can't teach every new word that appears in a lesson. These criteria help you decide what to focus on.

Criterion	Ask yourself	Example
Frequency	How common is it?	teach *house* before *bungalow*
Usefulness	Will learners need it, in class or in their lives?	*check in* for learners who travel for work
Purpose	Do learners need to use it, or just recognise it?	*curtail* may be receptive only; *cut* productive
Learnability	How easy is it to understand, pronounce and remember?	cognates are easier; false friends harder
Lesson aims	Do learners need it for the task or text?	the few words that block understanding of a text

A good learner's dictionary shows how frequent a word is, and the **English Vocabulary Profile** shows the level at which learners typically know each meaning of a word. Grouping words around a topic or situation (a **lexical field**, such as *hotel: reception, check in, room service, key card*) also helps learners connect new words.

Clarifying a new item

Here is a typical clarification of a new word. To experience it as a learner would, the target word has been replaced with an invented one. As you read, try to work out the English word.

	Stage	Example
1	**Set the context and convey the meaning**	*My friend Kelly loves Korean pop music. She recently went to a concert by her favourite band, but it was much worse than she had expected: the singing was terrible. Kelly was really* ***gordobashed****.*
2	**Elicit or give the word**	The teacher asks *How did Kelly feel?* and, if nobody knows, gives the word.
3	**Check understanding**	*Did Kelly expect the concert to be good?* (Yes) *Was it good?* (No) *Was she happy?* (No) *Have you ever felt like this? What happened?*
4	**Model and drill the pronunciation**	The teacher models the word, shows the number of syllables and the stress, and learners repeat it.
5	**Write it on the board**	with its word class, stress, collocations and an example sentence
6	**Learners record it**	in their notebooks or vocabulary app

Did you guess *disappointed*? Because it is an abstract word describing a feeling, the teacher used a short **anecdote** to convey the meaning and **concept questions** to check it, then a **personal question** to see whether learners could relate it to their own experience. The board might look like this.

> **BOARD**
>
> be / feel / look **disappointed** (adj) with / by / at something · in / with someone
>
> dis·a·PPOINT·ed /ˌdɪsəˈpɔɪntɪd/ really / deeply / bitterly disappointed
>
> *Kelly was really disappointed with the concert.*

This sequence isn't fixed. For many words, quicker techniques work better: a picture for *chair*, realia for *necklace*, a mime for *stroll*. For a full list of techniques for conveying meaning and checking understanding, see the **Conveying Meaning and Checking Understanding** handout.

Helping learners remember

Recording vocabulary

Encourage learners to record more than a translation: the word class, pronunciation, collocations and an example sentence. Different formats suit different learners and items.

Format	Good for
Word cards or digital flashcards	regular, spaced self-testing (many apps schedule reviews automatically)
Mind maps	topic vocabulary and connections between words
Collocation grids	showing which words go together (*make / do + a mistake, homework, a decision*)
Word family tables	word formation (*decide, decision, decisive, decisively*)
A personal vocabulary notebook	words learners choose themselves, with their own example sentences

Recycling and practice

Plan for learners to meet and use new vocabulary again and again, moving from recognising it to using it freely.

Stage	Activity ideas
Noticing	highlight collocations in a text; match words to pictures or definitions; sort words into categories
Remembering	quick quizzes at the start of the next lesson; "what's missing?" from the board; spaced reviews with flashcards; describe a word for a partner to guess
Using (controlled)	gap-fills in context; choose the best collocation; complete sentences so they are true for you
Using (freer)	use five new words in a story or discussion; a role-play or task that needs the vocabulary; personal questions
Recycling	a class vocabulary box or wall; review games; bring back old words in new texts and tasks

Developing learner independence

Learners will meet far more words than you can teach, so help them learn vocabulary on their own.

- **Guessing from context:** use clues in the surrounding text and word parts to work out meaning (see **Teaching Reading**).
- **Using a learner's dictionary:** find the right meaning, pronunciation, collocations and example sentences, not just a translation.
- **Word formation:** recognise common prefixes and suffixes (see **Appendix B**).
- **Spaced self-testing:** review words at increasing intervals with cards or an app.
- **Reading and listening extensively:** meet lots of words in context outside class.

> **TEACHING TIP**
> L1 translation can be a quick, effective way to establish the basic meaning of a word, especially for concrete items. But it can also mislead (false friends, or words that don't match exactly), so follow it with work on how the word is used in English.

Choosing a lesson shape

If...	Consider	Why
the vocabulary is new to learners	**Presentation – Practice – Production**	clarification before practice gives them a clear start
learners know some of the vocabulary	**Test – Teach – Test**	you teach only the items they don't know
vocabulary comes up in a text or task	**Receptive Skills Cycle or Task-Based Learning**	deal with useful emerging vocabulary after the text or task

Making it work

Teach items in context

Present new words in a sentence or situation, so learners see how they are used. Words met in isolation are harder to remember and use.

Teach collocations and chunks

Get into the habit of highlighting the words that typically go with a new item: *make a decision*, *heavy traffic*, *interested in*.

Don't overload learners

Learners can only process a limited number of new items in a lesson. A focused set of useful items, well practised, is better than a long list.

Personalise

Asking learners to use new words to talk about themselves makes them more memorable.

Recycle

Bring vocabulary back in later lessons, and ask learners to recall it, not just recognise it. Reassure them that it takes time and many encounters to learn a word.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Teaching long lists of words.	Choose a focused set of useful items.
Teaching single words without collocations.	Highlight the words they typically go with.
Teaching only the meaning.	Include pronunciation, form and use, as needed.
Long definitions that are harder than the word.	Use pictures, examples, situations or translation.
Teaching opposites or near-synonyms together.	Teach one first, or link words through a theme or story instead.
Never coming back to words once taught.	Plan regular recycling and retrieval.

ONLINE CLASSES

Use images and slides to convey meaning quickly, and the chat for fast retrieval quizzes ("type the word that means..."). Shared class word lists and flashcard apps make recording and spaced review easy, and learners can practise outside class.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Vocabulary includes multi-word items: collocations, chunks, phrasal verbs and idioms.
- Knowing a word involves form, meaning and use, not just its meaning.
- Prioritise high-frequency, useful items, and decide what learners need to use and what they only need to recognise.
- Learners need many encounters and spaced retrieval to remember words.
- Help learners become independent: guessing from context, dictionaries, recording and extensive reading.

WHERE NEXT

Conveying Meaning and Checking Understanding techniques for clarifying vocabulary

Teaching Grammar the grammar–vocabulary continuum

Teaching Reading guessing words from context and extensive reading

Practice Activities from controlled to communicative practice

Presentation – Practice – Production, Test – Teach – Test (frameworks) planning a vocabulary lesson

Dictionaries and tools

Cambridge Dictionary	dictionary.cambridge.org
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English	ldoceonline.com
Oxford Learner's Dictionaries	oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com
Oxford Collocations Dictionary (online version)	freecollocation.com
English Vocabulary Profile	englishprofile.org

References and further reading

Laufer, B. & Hulstijn, J. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(1), 1–26.

Lewis, M. (1993). *The Lexical Approach*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

McCarten, J. (2007). *Teaching Vocabulary: Lessons from the Corpus, Lessons for the Classroom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nation, I.S.P. (2006). How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening? *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63(1), 59–82.

Nation, I.S.P. (2013). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to Teach Vocabulary*. Harlow: Longman.

Tinkham, T. (1993). The effect of semantic clustering on the learning of second language vocabulary. *System*, 21(3), 371–380.

Webb, S. (2007). The effects of repetition on vocabulary knowledge. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(1), 46–65.

Webb, S. & Nation, P. (2017). *How Vocabulary Is Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix A · Language analysis sheet

Use this sheet to analyse a lexical item before you teach it. It follows the same structure as the sheet in the **Teaching Grammar** handout, adapted for vocabulary.

Template

Target item	*the word or phrase, with an example sentence*
Context	*the situation in which you will present it*
Meaning	*what it means in this context; its concept*
Conveying meaning	*picture, mime, situation, example, translation…*
Concept questions	*three to five short questions, with answers*
Form	*word class, word family, spelling, irregular forms*
Use	*collocations, grammar patterns, register, connotation*
Pronunciation	*phonemic script, syllables, word stress*
Related words	*synonyms, antonyms, words often confused with it*
Problems and solutions	*what learners may find difficult, and what you will do*

Worked example · disappointed

Target item	**disappointed** *Kelly was really disappointed with the concert.*
Context	A friend's experience at a concert that was worse than expected.
Meaning	unhappy because something was not as good as you expected or hoped, or didn't happen
Conveying meaning	a short anecdote (situational presentation), plus a facial expression
Concept questions	*Did Kelly expect the concert to be good?* (Yes) *Was it good?* (No) *Was she happy about it?* (No) *Have you ever felt disappointed? What happened?*
Form	adjective; word family: *disappoint* (v), *disappointment* (n), *disappointing* (adj) spelling: double *p*, single *s*
Use	*be / feel / look disappointed* *disappointed with / by / at something; disappointed in / with someone; disappointed that…* *really / very / deeply / bitterly disappointed* neutral register; negative feeling
Pronunciation	dis·a·PPOINT·ed /ˌdɪsəˈpɔɪntɪd/ four syllables; main stress on the third; *-ed* pronounced /ɪd/
Related words	*upset, let down* (informal: *I felt let down*); opposite: *satisfied, pleased*; confused with: *disappointing*

Problems and solutions	**-ed / -ing confusion:** *The concert was disappointed.* → Contrast: the concert was *disappointing*; Kelly was *disappointed*. Use a person and a thing on the board. **Prepositions:** *disappointed of the concert.* → Board the common patterns; practise with personal examples. **Pronunciation:** wrong stress (*DISappointed*) or a missing syllable in the *-ed* ending. → Mark the stress and syllables, and drill the word in a phrase. **L1 differences:** some languages have one word covering *disappointed* and *disillusioned*, or a false friend. → Check the meaning with concept questions, not just translation.

Appendix B · Vocabulary map for teachers

A compact overview of key terms for describing vocabulary. For more detail, see the references above.

Meaning relations

Relation	What it is	Examples
Synonyms	words with a similar meaning (rarely identical in use)	*big / large; start / begin*
Antonyms	words with an opposite meaning	*hot / cold; buy / sell*
Hyponyms	specific words under a general word (superordinate)	*vehicle → car, bus, bicycle*
Lexical sets	words connected by a topic	*kitchen: oven, fridge, sink*
Polysemy	one word with several related meanings	*head* (of the body, of a company)
Homonyms	same form, unrelated meanings	*bank* (money), *bank* (river)
Homophones	same sound, different spelling and meaning	*there / their / they're*
False friends	words that look like an L1 word but mean something different	*actual* (≠ current); *sensible* (≠ sensitive)

Collocation patterns

Pattern	Examples
adjective + noun	*heavy rain, strong coffee, a close friend*
verb + noun	*make a mistake, do homework, take a photo*
adverb + adjective	*deeply disappointed, highly unlikely, fully aware*
verb + adverb	*speak fluently, work hard*
noun + noun	*traffic jam, bus stop, job interview*
word + preposition	*interested in, depend on, the reason for*

Word formation

Process	What it is	Examples
Prefixes	added to the beginning, often changing meaning	*un-* (unhappy), *dis-* (dislike), *re-* (redo), *mis-* (misunderstand), *over-* (overcook), *pre-* (preview)
Suffixes	added to the end, often changing word class	nouns: *-tion, -ment, -ness, -er*; adjectives: *-ful, -less, -able, -ive*; verbs: *-ise, -en*; adverbs: *-ly*
Compounding	combining two words	*toothbrush, part-time, washing machine*
Conversion	using a word as a different word class with no change	*a text → to text*; *an email → to email*

Process	What it is	Examples
Clipping and blending	shortening or combining words	*phone* (telephone); *brunch* (breakfast + lunch)

Register and connotation

Feature	Examples
Formal and informal	*purchase* (formal) / *buy* (neutral) / *get* (informal)
Positive and negative connotation	*slim* (positive) / *thin* (neutral) / *skinny* (often negative)
Regional variety	*flat* (UK) / *apartment* (US); *holiday* (UK) / *vacation* (US)
Specialist and everyday	*myocardial infarction* (medical) / *heart attack* (everyday)