

An Introduction to Teacher Development

Programme 4: Introducing vocabulary – teacher support worksheet

In another programme in this series we listen to a class where teacher **Eka** was teaching vocabulary on the theme of the weather. In this programme, we continue with a discussion around how to teach our students new words.

What does 'knowing a word' involve? **Dina**, from India, explains:

'Knowing a word means how to spell it, how to pronounce it and how to use it correctly in a sentence.'

And another teacher, **Dini**, reminds us that words don't exist in isolation so she introduces new vocabulary in 'chunks' – or parts of sentences that feature the new word(s).

'When I introduce new vocabulary, I encourage them to use "chunks". So if I want to teach "bus", I'll ask them to chunk – for example "get onto the bus", "get off the bus", things like that.'

It is vital students get to know what 'friends' a word has. **Mala**, who teaches in India, encourages her students to ask questions about new words – for example,

'Can this word be this word's best friend? Can they live together? Can they be a family?'

It takes time to build a good knowledge of vocabulary. It is important to teach and practise new words in real contexts and we need to give students lots of exposure to stories, dialogues and simple conversations, so that they will gradually notice how words are used.

There are many different ways to introduce and illustrate new words – and without simply saying 'open your book and look at page 25'!

Real objects – often called 'realia' – can be very stimulating and can make our lessons fun and memorable.

Celso, from Mozambique, says:

'When a teacher brings real objects, it helps students' understanding, they see the real things ... It's less time consuming for teaching vocabulary.'

An idea like this is really effective and it doesn't rely on any high tech resources. Teachers, or their students, can help by bringing in objects, books and pictures to create materials for bringing lessons to life!

Teachers can draw pictures on the board, on paper on cards, or bring in photographs cut out from magazines. It's great, for example, if you can make little 'flash cards' to help students practise words, or with their help, decorate the whole classroom with words and images.

Many teachers are very good actors! And another useful method of illustrating meaning is to pull faces, use gestures or actions – and get your students to do the same, they'll love it. Here's **Shourya** to explain.

'The use of gestures is very important. Words like running, jumping, jogging. The difference between running and jogging or walking. All these words can be easily communicated with a simple gesture, without too much of an effort.'

At beginner levels we might use simple songs, rhymes and chants to introduce new words and phrases, involving lots of repetition. Children love moving around and doing things! The physical movements help make words and sounds more memorable.

With more advanced students many teachers may start with a text, and use that as a springboard. The vocabulary comes from a topic, we invite them to collaborate, to share ideas, to do a bit of research and use their dictionaries. As **Oscar** in Colombia explains:

'It's through content, through a story or a poem, through a song, through something the students are motivated to know. It's to provide learners with a reason to communicate. It's not only about learning grammar and that's it.'

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What happens when students ask about meaning? Obviously we encourage them to look at the context and to use dictionaries if they are available. But should the entire lesson be conducted in English? What do you think? As we've heard, there are a range of ways to explain unfamiliar words, but sometimes teachers find it easier to do a quick translation to explain a common noun or for more abstract ideas that are difficult to illustrate – but it's important to go back to using English as quickly as possible.

We can't leave this topic without thinking about how to make sure students will remember new words and expressions. With a well-designed syllabus and textbook there will hopefully be lots of built-in recycling – repeating of the vocabulary and new language – so students become familiar with the words. But often that is not the case, so it is up to us, the teachers to look for opportunities to recycle. So plan for revision activities as you go along and share your best ideas with your colleagues.

Here is just one example from **Kai** in Kazakhstan.

'There's one activity which doesn't really require any resources – it's called Word Box. The teacher picks words from the vocabulary that's been presented in that lesson or that week – writes them on bits of paper and puts them in a box. A student is invited to pick one but doesn't show that word to the other students. He/she tries to explain or describe it without saying that word. They describe it to the class or their group and the others have to guess the word.'

I would always encourage students to keep a vocabulary book where they collect new words and learn them. They shouldn't just write down single words but put them in sentences which show how they are used.

Programme summary: First the basics, as well as the **meaning** of words, learners need to remember the **sounds** of words, the **spelling** and of course **how and when to use them**.

It is very important to teach and practise new words in **short phrases, or chunks**.

Give students **lots of exposure** to the new words. **Drilling**, repeating and recycling new words will help them remember and use them appropriately.

Ideas to **illustrate meaning** include real objects, pictures, drawings, flash cards, gestures and actions, and songs. Decorate your classroom with images and words.

To encourage more **independence** get advanced students to read about a topic and discuss the possible meanings of unfamiliar words and expressions.

Don't let your students forget the words, and get them to keep a **vocabulary book**. Plan ahead with activities to **recycle** the new vocabulary.

Ask a colleague

Talk to other teachers about the ideas in this programme and keep a list of useful ideas.

Over to you!

Write a list of topics or vocabulary items that you plan to present to your class in the coming weeks. How could you use real objects, images or realia to present these items? What items (objects or images) could you ask your students to bring to class to help illustrate this new vocabulary?