

Teaching Vocabulary: Two Dozen Tips & Techniques

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I. Oldies but goodies

1. Matching synonyms
2. Matching opposites
3. Fill in the blank sentences

II. Variations on the above

I. Choose *all* the possible answers

We ate lunch in the _____.

cafeteria restaurant snack snack bar salad bar diner

2. Where would you find . . . ?

an MD _____	a) in the British or Canadian Parliament
a Ph.D. _____	b) on a ruler
an MP _____	c) on an engine
in. _____	d) in a hospital
hp _____	e) in a university

3. Complete the phrases

to achieve _____	a) a secret
to reveal _____	b) an idea
to grasp _____	c) a goal

4. Correct the mistakes

He felt exhausted after a long nap. E.g., *refreshed* for *exhausted* **or** *running to school* for *a long nap*

5. Label a picture

monitor keyboard mouse screen

6. Draw a picture (Works for a limited number of words)

Draw a *target*.

Draw a *bow and arrow* and label each one.

7. Cross out the word that doesn't belong with the others in the group.

uncle father ~~amnt~~ brother

EST pm ~~Ph.D.~~ BC

meadow ~~river~~ yard field

8. Categories - You give the example; students give the category. Or vice versa.

Examples: gun, knife, club: weapon

Category: weapon: gun, knife, club

9. Complete the sentences

I was exhausted after _____

III. Distinguishing shades of meaning & near synonyms

I. Analogies - Good even at low levels

This exercise allows those with limited English to do something on a more sophisticated level than they are usually able to do.

easy : hard :: cold : hot

warp : wood :: peel : paint

skyscraper : city :: tree : forest

shatter : glass :: crumble : stone

2. Choose the two possible answers that can complete each sentence.

Semantic: She *longed for* . . .

- (a) her freedom.
- (b) her lover who was far away.
- (c) some ketchup for her French fries. (*only a joke; not serious enough*)

Grammatical: He *pondered* . . .

- (a) his future.
- (b) that he didn't know what to do. (*only followed by a noun, not a clause*)
- (c) the meaning of life.

Good source for incorrect answers: student errors

3. Semantic categories - e.g., break, damage

He *dented* the . . . car's bumper / tree branch / glass of water

She *splintered* the . . . can / board / mirror

He *shattered* the . . . mirror / water / curtains

She *shredded* the . . . can / tree branch / curtains

4. Arrange the words on a scale (most to least, largest to smallest, etc.)

hot > warm > lukewarm > cool > cold

despise > hate > dislike

This is nice to do when possible, but it's not possible all that often. New words are usually presented and defined with one or two known words. Focus on how the new word differs from the one they already know.

For example:

5. Which word in each pair is stronger, more forceful, or more intense?

___ to surprise

___ to boil

___ to toss

___ to hurl

___ to astound

___ to simmer

___ to throw

___ to throw

6. Which word in each pair is slang?

___ a kid

___ disgusting

___ to fail

___ a child

___ gross

___ to flunk

**7. Which word would be more polite when talking about a person?
or Which word has a more positive connotation?**

___ thin

___ fat

___ frugal

___ skinny

___ overweight

___ miserly

8. Complete the definitions - How are these actions performed?

thrust = to push _____ (*forcefully, hard*)

shatter = to break _____ (*into many pieces*)

tap = to hit _____ (*lightly, softly*)

IV. Things to do with the vocabulary in a reading passage

1. Guessing word meaning from context - See suggestions in Section V.

But make sure it is really possible to guess the meaning from context. A lot of textbooks give students context exercises using unclear or ambiguous examples. This just convinces them that it's not really possible to do.

If you have a reading with a lot of vocabulary words whose meanings you cannot reasonably expect students to get from context, try some of these techniques.

2. Give students the definitions; let them find the words.

e.g., find a word in paragraph 5 that means *angry*.

A good way to deal with a difficult article without simply giving students the vocabulary. This also teaches them to focus on context and can be a good complement to work on guessing meaning (section V below).

3. Teach students when *not* to look up a word.

- Can you get a general sense of the word? e.g., a person? a feeling? a job? something good/bad?
- Find all the words on a page that refer to *movement* (or *speaking*).
- Do you really need to know exactly what each word means to understand the action of the story? How much can you understand *before* you use a dictionary?
- Take a magic marker and block out all the words you don't know. Can you still tell what the passage is about?

Follow-up/reinforcement

4. Parts of speech

With a corpus of words you've already studied, give sentences that require a different part of speech. (Dictionary use)

5. Different meanings of familiar vocabulary

e.g., *toll*

[while driving on the highway] There's a *toll* bridge ahead. Do you have any quarters?

The highway death *toll* has declined sharply since police began to enforce the drunk driving laws more aggressively.

The bell in the old church tower *tolled* four o'clock.

V. Teaching students how to guess word meaning from context

Types of context clues:

1. Cause & effect - Label the sentence C & E; then make a guess.

Because we *lingered* too long at the restaurant, we missed the beginning of the movie.

The door was *ajar*, so the dog got out of the house.

2. Opposite/contrast - Underline the two words or phrases in contrast to one another, then make a guess.

Even though I studied for hours, I *flunked* the test.

My last apartment was really small, but my new place is quite *spacious*.

3. General sense - Focus on SVO, actor & recipient of action. What type of word is it?

If it is a **noun**: a person, place, thing, abstract idea

If it is a **verb**: an action (e.g., movement?), or feeling/emotion, etc.

If it is an **adjective**: what is it describing? good or bad? size? color? shape? emotion?

Each summer thousands of tourists *flock* to the beaches of Cape Cod.

The father *tossed* the ball to his little boy.

4. Synonyms or paraphrases - Found elsewhere in the sentence or paragraph

Samuel was *deaf*, but he didn't let his handicap get in the way of his success.

Sally's flower garden included dozens of *marigolds*, which she tended with great care.

5. Examples - if you know the example, you can often figure out the category; if you know the category, you can get a general idea of what the example is.

The *baboon*, like other apes, is a very social animal.

6. Recognizing definitions - Common in college textbooks, newspaper & magazine articles

Many children of normal intelligence have great difficulty learning how to read, write, or work with numbers. Often thought of as "underachievers," such children are said to have a *learning disability*, a disorder that interferes in some way with school achievement.

[from *Ten Steps to Improving College Reading Skills*]

VI. Miscellaneous

I. Word sheets

A simple but effective way to review vocabulary from a given unit is to post a sheet of paper with the words under study and talk about them. You can practice pronunciation, conduct oral mini-quizzes, answer students' questions, etc. Do this as a warm-up for two or three minutes each day.

For example:

- Which words have +/- connotations?
- Which words refer to people?
- Which words are verbs?
- What's the opposite of X?
- I'll give you a word; tell me what the opposite is in the list.
- What's a more polite way of saying X?
- X is a verb. What's the noun form?

2. Look for words that mean . . .

When using a magazine or newspaper in the class, you can have students look for words in a certain category while they're doing other reading and scanning activities.

One issue of *Time Magazine* yielded the following:

words for *go up*: soar, rise, raise, increase, push up

words for *go down*: fall, plummet, sink, decrease

Other categories of words that might work:

words that describe *movement, travel*

words related to *crime*

names of *government positions* or *occupations* (president, mayor, etc.)

In a work of fiction or a profile of a famous person:

adjectives that describe the main characters, both what they look like and how they act

VII. Fun & games

I. Act out/pantomime (Charades)

Give students cards with instructions like the examples below. Have them perform the actions without speaking. The other students try to guess the word or expression that the student is pantomiming.

Open the door *fearfully*.

Walk across the room *cautiously*.

2. Crossword Puzzles (a number of software programs exist that allow you to create your own)

The clues can be synonyms, antonyms, complete the sentences. Helps focus on spelling as well as meaning.

3. Categories Game (\$25,000 Pyramid)

Divide the class into teams. One person from a team sits in front of the class. The rest of the team members are given a card with a category, For example: *Things that are red*. The team members take turns giving examples of the category until the person in the “hot seat” guesses it or all the team members have given a clue. If the person in front cannot guess, the other team can confer and try to guess.

NOTE: The clues must be *examples, not definitions*. In the above example, *ketchup, blood*, and a *stop sign* are all acceptable clues. *Color* is not.

Examples of categories:

Things that are . . . yellow, expensive, fragile, made of glass, found on a farm
American authors, state capitals, things in a woman’s purse, winter clothing
things that are sold in bottles, places where you have to stand in line, people who wear uniforms

4. Password

Divide the class into two teams. One person from each team sits in a chair in front of the class. Those two people receive a card with a vocabulary word. The first person gives a one-word clue to his/her team. If no one from the team can guess, the second person gives a clue to his/her team. This alternates back and forth until someone from one of the teams guesses the word, or until a specified number of clues has been given.

5. Drawing pictures (Win, Lose or Draw)

This works well if you have an empty classroom nearby. Divide the class into two groups. Give each one a list of vocabulary words (idiomatic expressions also work well for this). The students draw pictures—but no words—on the board so that the students in the other group can guess the words or expressions they’re trying to represent. This is a fun way to review some vocabulary and break up the class routine.

A note on keeping score

You can keep score in most of these games, but I’ve found things actually go more smoothly when you don’t. No one disputes points, and students don’t seem to mind that there’s no clear “winner” or “loser.”

Occasionally, a student will ask why I’m not keeping track of who won and lost. I usually tell him (it’s never a ‘her’) that we’re just learning how the game is played now, so I’m not going to bother this time. I never bother keeping score any subsequent times, either, but I’ve never been asked about it a second time.

VIII. Miscellaneous examples

I. A follow-up to a radio interview of a psychologist who discussed money and people's attitudes towards it.

Money Talks

Below are some words used to describe people and their attitudes towards money. Working with another student, put them into the proper category.

a miser	an overspender	generous
cheap	a cheapskate	giving
tight	a tightwad	thrifty
frugal	a spendthrift	stingy

	spends money	saves money
positive connotation	<i>generous</i>	
negative connotation		<i>a miser</i>

2. A follow-up to an article on health

Match these medical terms with the parts of the body they involve.

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------|
| _____ 1) to clot | |
| _____ 2) asthma | |
| _____ 3) a stroke | a) brain |
| _____ 4) hemorrhaging | b) lungs |
| _____ 5) a migraine | c) blood |
| _____ 6) leukemia | |
| _____ 7) respiration | |