

Quick guide for teachers

Helping all students to improve
their vocabulary





All students deserve support

All students deserve support with their vocabulary, whether it is strong or weak. There is much that schools can do to help all students to improve. Teachers of all subjects can play a part in this - not just teachers of English.

The following teaching strategies are useful for all students, including those with English as an Additional Language.

Access to the right dictionary

Teachers often provide dictionaries for students to use to look up word meanings. While it is good teaching practice to ensure that a dictionary (either physical or on-line) is readily available, students do not always find dictionary definitions easy to understand. Complex or old-fashioned language may be used. For many words, multiple meanings are listed which some students find hard to select from. It is therefore important to check that the classroom dictionary or dictionaries are appropriate for the students.

Resources

- The Cambridge Dictionary website offers four different on-line dictionaries, each of which is targeted at a different student population.
- Of these dictionaries, the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary has the words, phrases, and collocations (habitual uses of one word with another) that intermediate level learners of British English as an Additional Language need to know.
- Clear, simple definitions and audio pronunciations, with thousands of example sentences from the Cambridge English Corpus, have been created. These are to help students to write and speak English more naturally.

Actively teaching vocabulary

Simply providing a dictionary is not enough. Students need to use new words in extended conversation. Spending some lesson time to actively teaching vocabulary is therefore very important. By explicitly teaching 300 to 400 words per year, teachers can grow their students' vocabulary by 3000-4000 words, which is what is needed for academic successⁱ.



Key questions for teachers

1. Which key words in this lesson will my students need to understand when I am talking?
2. How difficult are the words in the written texts that I will use in this lesson?
3. Which are the most important words to teach?
4. Are there any barriers or common misunderstandings related to these words?

In general, teaching vocabulary well means providing multiple encounters with new words in lots of different contexts, together with opportunities to think about, discuss, and apply the wordsⁱⁱ.

The STAR modelⁱⁱⁱ is a popular way of teaching vocabulary:

- It is a whole school, mixed ability teaching method.
- It can be used in the context of many different school subjects.
- It works well for students with English as an Additional Language.
- It also works well with lower ability students.

The STAR model of teaching vocabulary

Select really useful vocabulary that is essential to the topic being taught. This could be four to six words that are needed to summarise a text or story that the teacher is using. However, it is also good to include some words that are not central to the story or text but that students will probably encounter in other reading material.

Teach the selected vocabulary in a structured manner. It can help to think of the vocabulary instruction that students may need before, during, and after reading at text or story.

- Before reading, check that students understand the concepts needed to make sense of the part of the text that contains the new word.
- During reading, allocate the new words to particular students and ask them to note when and how they are used.
- Afterwards, discuss the new words with the students to check they have absorbed their meanings.

There are many other ways to actively teach new words. Actions, songs, a 'word wall' and many other approaches can be used, depending on the ages of the students.

Activate the meaning by using the words in context. Key vocabulary from the text or story will come up naturally in classroom discussions. It is good to reinforce understanding by connecting the new words to other words that students already know, and by using the words in questions. Additionally, set students writing assignments and other tasks to ensure that they hear, read, and write the new words.

Review the new words to make sure students have retained them. This can be done through discussions at a later point, as well as games, writing, and creating glossaries and word books.

Resources

There is a lot of good research on the importance of vocabulary in education. For a broad and readable overview, and for details of teaching strategies and activities, we recommend:

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Kucan, L. (2008). *Creating robust vocabulary: Frequently asked questions and extended examples*. New York: Guildford Press.

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. (2nd ed.). New York: Guildford Press.

Blachowicz, C. & Fisher, P. J. (2015). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Quigley, A. (2018). *Closing the vocabulary gap*. London and New York: Routledge.



Expanding vocabulary through reading

Reading widely is a fantastic way for students to expand their vocabularies. Once students become reasonably fluent, reading is the means by which they learn most new words^{iv} – more than through using a dictionary. Teachers of all subjects can make sure their students read widely and deeply through both guided and independent reading.

By reading aloud to them, teachers can expose students to a level of vocabulary that is too hard for many to read independently. Making this process a little interactive is particularly beneficial. For example, teachers can pause briefly to give simple definitions of new words. Also, re-reading material can help to cement understanding.

Additionally, teachers of English can organise book clubs, literature circles, and library time for their students. Reading for pleasure is something that many children and adults enjoy, and new words are often picked up unconsciously, with little effort. The wider the variety of books that students read, the greater their gains in general vocabulary will be.

Resources

A quick internet search will reveal lists of popular books for children in different age groups to read for pleasure.

In the UK, for example, <https://schoolreadinglist.co.uk/> and <https://www.lovereadingschools.co.uk/> provide recommended reading lists for by year group for both primary and secondary school students.



Other simple strategies and activities

There are many other strategies and activities that teachers can try out with their students to improve their vocabulary.

Asking open-ended questions, which require more than a one-word response, is an effective means of eliciting students' comments and engaging them in extended conversations. To get the best possible vocabulary-rich responses, it is important that teachers allow enough 'wait time'. Students need time to think about the question, their answer, and the words that they would like to use to best communicate that answer. This is often longer than teachers think.

Further strategies are mentioned in a case study on our website. The Haberdashers' Boys' School is a large independent day school for boys aged 5-18, educating around 1100 pupils. The school uses our tests to inform teaching on a day-to-day basis. Suggestions for the teacher of a student with a low MidYIS vocabulary score include:

- encouraging the student to use new language and not penalising misuse
- providing clear written instructions
- allowing time to complete long written passages
- providing a glossary and/or 'scaffolding' to structure work
- encouraging the student to develop their own glossary and write their own meanings for words.

References

ⁱ Quigley, A. (2018). *Closing the vocabulary gap*. London and New York: Routledge.

ⁱⁱ Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. (2nd ed.). New York: Guildford Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Blachowicz C. (undated). Vocabulary lessons. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/vocabulary-lessons> Accessed 14/12/21.

Blachowicz, C., & Fisher, P. (2015). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education.

^{iv} Cunningham, A. E. (2005). 'Vocabulary growth through independent reading and reading aloud to children'. In E. H. Hiebert & M. L. Kamhi (eds.), *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice* (45-68). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.