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General advice to learning English vocabulary

Learning new vocabulary you need to know what to learn, namely how many words in English, how many words does the average English speaker use in everyday speech, how many words make up 50% of everything written in English. It will enhance the process of teaching vocabulary to your students.

You have also to remember that there are words which you need simply to understand when you read or hear them (receptive vocabulary) and words you need to be able to use yourself (productive vocabulary). Clearly you need to spend the most time learning the last group.

Learning a new word it is important to know the words it is usually associated with; to know its grammatical characteristics; its phonological form. It is also very important to learn new words in phrases, not in isolation. For example: write down adjectives and nouns that are often associated, e.g. classical music, common sense, native speaker; write down verbs and nouns that form expressions, e.g. to express an opinion, to take place; write down nouns in appropriate phrases, e.g. to get in touch with, a sense of humor; write down words with their preposition, e.g. to look for, at a glance, thanks in advance. Note special grammar characteristics of new words. Note special pronunciation problems of new words.

Here are some advice about what you should do when you come across new words.

When you are reading something in English, do not stop to look up every new word or expression: it slows down your reading and your comprehension. Look up only those words that are really important for understanding the text. When you have finished reading, look back at what you have read and then probably look up some extra words and write down new expressions you are interested in. Similarly when you listen to English, do not pause when you hear words or expressions that you do

not know. Keep listening for the overall meaning. When you read or listen to English, it is sometimes possible to guess the meaning of a word you do not know before you look it up or ask its meaning. Decide first what part of speech the word is, and then look for clues in its context or form.

It is very important to review new words. Reviewing is especially useful for remembering new stuff in the target language. It entails reviewing at different intervals, at first close together and then increasingly far apart. Naturally, the amount of time needed to make new stuff automatic depends on the kind of stuff involved.

One of the great advantages of reviewing vocabulary is that it should help you to make the step from having something in your receptive vocabulary to having it in your active vocabulary. You can encourage this process by writing the words and expressions you are trying to learn in a sentence relating to your life and interests at the moment; making an effort to use the new words and expressions in your next class or homework or in some other way; keeping a learning diary in which you note down things that particularly interest you about the words you have learned; watching out for the words and expressions you are trying to learn in your general reading of English. If you come across any of them, write them down in their context in your diary or notebook; writing a paragraph or story linking the words and expressions you want to learn.

All the information mentioned above is effective when it is applied to learning the definitional and contextual information, involving students actively in learning new word meaning. However, very often the teacher needs to teach complex concepts which require multidimensional teaching techniques. Here we mean the following ones: Semantic mapping (one targeted word is tied through the discussion and the mapping to other related words); Semantic Feature Analysis which draws upon students' prior knowledge, using discussions to include information about word meaning into a graphic display; Comparing and Contrasting is also very effective in learning complex concepts.

What approaches you use to teach a word would depend on a number of factors. First, it would depend on the word itself. If a word's meaning seems fairly

self-evident, you might provide relatively minimal instruction. For words that are more complex , you might provide instructions like Semantic mapping, Semantic Feature Analysis or Comparing and Contrasting.

Second, you might want to use techniques that are productive.

Anyway, whatever you chose, learning L2 vocabulary should be effective and favour achieving L2 speaking fluency.

References

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