

## The Problems of Working at a System of Exercises for Teaching Vocabulary

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### Abstract

This article deals with the problem of working at a system of exercises for teaching vocabulary and the pre-planned lesson stages should be taught pre-selected vocabulary items for learners.

**Keywords:** vocabulary, teaching, resource, component, conjunction, components, categories, lexical, game, prefixes, affixation, errors.

We have researched possible sources of vocabulary input, including vocabulary books, readers, dictionaries and corpora. A motivated and self-directed learner might be able to acquire a large vocabulary simply by using these resources. However, many learners sign up for language courses in the expectation that, at least some of the time, they will be presented with language, rather than having to go out and find it for themselves. By presentation, we mean those pre-planned lesson stages in which learners are taught pre-selected vocabulary items<sup>1</sup>. Of course, incidental vocabulary teaching can occur at other times of the lesson, as when a text or a discussion throws up unfamiliar vocabulary. In this chapter, however, we will be mainly concerned with ways vocabulary can be formally presented in the classroom. But many of the issues are relevant to the informal teaching of vocabulary as well.

At the very least learners need to learn both the meaning and the form of a new word. We shall deal with each of these components in turn. But it's worth pointing out that both these aspects of a word should be presented in close conjunction in order to ensure a tight meaning-and-form fit. The greater the gap between the presentation of a word's form and its meaning, the less likely that the learner will make a mental connection between the two.

Let's say the teacher has decided to teach a related set of words - for example, items of clothing: shirt, trousers, jacket, socks, dress, jeans. The teacher has a number of options available. First, there is the question of how many words to present. This will depend on the following factors:

Word clap: Students stand or sit in a circle, and, following the teacher's lead, maintain a four-beat rhythm, clapping their hands on their thighs three times (one-two-three ...) and then both hands together (four!). The game should start slowly, but the pace of the clapping can gradually increase.

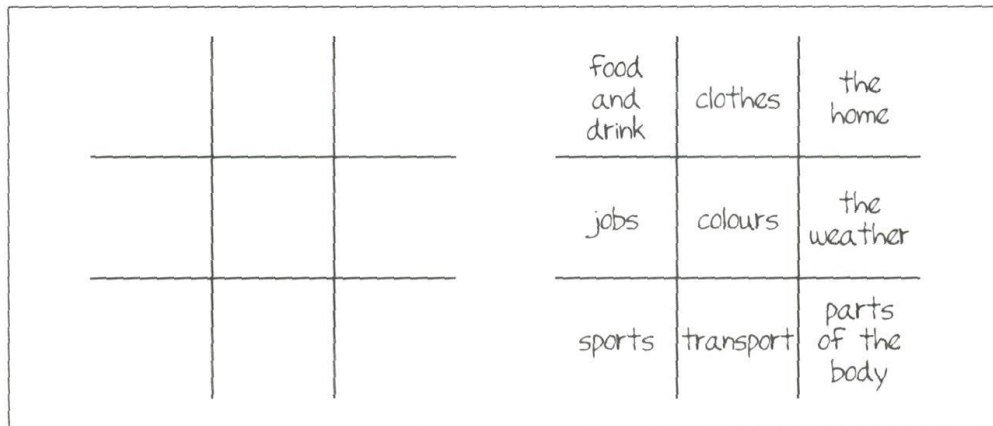
The idea is to take turns, clockwise, to shout out a different word from a pre-selected lexical set (for example, fruit and vegetables) on every fourth beat. Players who either repeat a word already used, or break the rhythm – or say nothing – are “out” and the game resumes without them, until only one player is left. The teacher can change the lexical set by shouting out the name of a new set at strategic points: Furniture! Nationalities! Jobs! etc.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.Cambridge. lesson UK](http://www.Cambridge.lessonUK)

Categories: Learners work in pairs or small groups. On a piece of paper, they draw up a number of columns, according to a model on the board, each column labelled with the name of a lexical set: e.g. fruit, transport, clothes, animals, sports. The teacher calls out a letter of the alphabet (e.g. B!), and to a time limit (e.g. three minutes), students write down as many words as they can beginning with that letter in the separate columns (banana, berry; bus; bikini, blouse; bear, bat; baseball, basketball...). The group with the most (correct) words wins.

Noughts and crosses: Draw two noughts and crosses grids on the board:



One is blank. In the other each square is labelled with a category, or with nine different phrasal verb particles (up, on, off, in, back, etc.), or nine different affixes (un-, non-, -less, -tion, etc.). Prepare a number of questions relating to each category. For example (if the class is monolingual): How do you say “tamburo” in English? Or, What is the opposite of “shy”? Divide the class into two teams: noughts and crosses. The object is to take turns choosing a category and answering a question in this category correctly so as to earn the right to place their team's symbol in the corresponding position in the blank grid. The winning team is the first to create a line of three (noughts or crosses), either vertically, horizontally, or diagonally.

Coffeepot: This is a guessing game. One learner answers yes/no questions from the rest of the class (or group) about a verb that she has thought of, or that the teacher has whispered to her. In the questions the word coffeepot is used in place of the mystery verb. So, for example, students might ask Do you coffeepot indoors or outdoors? Is coffee potting easy or difficult? Can you coffeepot with your hands? etc. If the verb that the student has selected is yawn the answers would be: Both indoors and outdoors; It's easy; No, you can't, but you might use your hands ... To make the game easier a list of, say, twenty verbs can be put on the board and the person who is 'it' chooses one of them. This can also be played in pairs.

Back to board: This is another guessing game, but this time the student who is 'it' has to guess a word by asking the rest of the class questions. The student sits facing the class, back to the board; the teacher writes a recently studied word or phrase or idiom on the board, out of sight of the student. The student asks different students yes/no or either/or questions in order to guess the word. For example: Helga, is it a verb or a noun? (A verb.) Dittmer, is it an action? (No.) Karl-Heinz, is it something you do with your mind? (Yes.) ... etc. To make the game easier, the words chosen can be limited in some way – e.g. all phrasal verbs; all character adjectives, and so on.

**The principles of teaching word formation and word combination**

We looked at some of the principles of word formation in English. We noted that words can be formed by the addition of prefixes and suffixes – a process called affixation. (The word affixation is itself an example of the result of adding affixes to the root fix.) We also saw how, by compounding, two or more words can join up to make one. Thus: black + board = blackboard. Or, new words can be created by a process called conversion, when a word that in one context is one part of speech (such as a noun), in another context can be enlisted to serve a different function (such as a verb). Hence, you may have heard the relatively recent term to board as in the teacher boarded the new words and the students wrote them down.

Then again words can cluster (but not join up) to form multi-word units – loosely called chunks – that behave as if they were single words. For example, alongside black, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English lists: black and white, black and blue, black sheep, in the black and to black out<sup>2</sup>. (This last is an example of a phrasal verb.) Many chunks have an idiomatic meaning – that is to say the meaning of the chunk as a whole is not directly inferable from the individual words: He's the black sheep of the family; you've introduced a red herring, etc.

The way bits of words combine, and the way words themselves can be combined, is a constant source of difficulty for learners. Errors of the following types are common:

**Affixation errors**

There aren't countless ways to bring happiness to my life thanks to the internet.

After finishing the paragraph and reading it again, I felt unsatisfied. I think that my real and only knowledge are in the vocabulary.

**Compounding errors**

In London I took a two floor bus and of course crossed the city in the highest floor.

I saw my dog died in a box's shoes.

**Errors of multi-word units**

We have also a buses network.

Sometimes dog isn't the best man's friend.

**Collocation errors**

I don't like when I do mistakes.

Some teachers are strict they put us a lot of homework and exams.

**Phrasal verb errors**

She used to go to school with her maid, and a maid was picking up her from school.

There are some days that the better it's stay in bed and don't get up you.

**Idiom errors**

I have no more money. So most of time I just watch shops' window.

I don't like to blow my own horn, but my grammar knowledge and my vocabulary are quite good.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.Cambridge. lesson UK](http://www.Cambridge.lessonUK)

In responding to these kinds of problems, there are two possible approaches.

You can either

- teach rules, or
- expose learners to lots of correct examples

A rule-based approach starts by isolating and highlighting any relevant patterns or regularities. Take word formation, for example. In a rule-based approach, words can be grouped and presented according to the manner of formation (affixation, compounding, conversion, etc.). Within these categories finer distinctions can be made. So, of the words formed by affixation we can select those formed by the addition of prefixes, and this group can be narrowed down further to those that have a negative meaning. The way these words are formed can then be described in general terms in the form of a rule – or 'rule of thumb'. Here is an example of such an explicit rule statement (from Gude K and Duckworth M, Proficiency Masterclass, OUP):

Negative prefixes. The prefixes mis-, dis-, ig-, and un- can all be used to give a word a rather negative meaning. The prefix may help you to guess the meaning of the word.

mis- = 'wrongly, badly' or 'not done' (mismanage)

dis- = 'away from, the opposite of, lack of' (distaste)

ig- = 'not, lacking in' (ignorant)

un- = 'not, lack of, the opposite, reversal or removal of' (undo)

Here is some advice to help you choose the correct prefix.

dis- can be used to form verbs, eg dissatisfy, adjectives, eg dishonest; and nouns, eg disability.

The prefix ig- appears only before the letter n.

A similar approach is used with word collocations, wherever a general tendency can be identified. Here, for example, is a course book extract that focuses on the difference between make and do combinations: VOCABULARY

Last night I tried to do my homework. However, I kept making mistakes because the man upstairs was doing his exercises and making a noise.

Make usually means to create, bring into existence, or produce a result.

Do usually means to perform an action. However, there are exceptions to this 'rule', as you will see in Exercise 3.

from Bell J and Gower R, Intermediate Matters, Longman

One problem with a rule-based approach is that the scope of the rule is not always clear. How many, and which, adjectives can be turned into verbs by the addition of -en, for example? Sweet and fresh — yes, but wet and dry? There is the added problem of the lack of one-to-one match between forms and categories. For example, in- and un- both express negation (uncertain, inactive), but in- can also be used with the meaning of in, or within (as in inclusive). And when do we use in-, as opposed to un- or non- or dis-, to convey negation? How, for example, does the learner know whether to use unsatisfied, dissatisfied, unsatisfied or no satisfied?

Other pattern-highlighting techniques involve the use of texts and include the following:

- learners are given a text and asked to search for and underline all compound nouns, negative prefixes, multi-word units, etc.
- learners find words in a text that are derivations. For example, 'Find three words in the text that are derived from sense ...'
- learners classify these derivations according to which part of speech they are
- learners categories underlined words in a text according to a common affix, or according to the word formation principle they exemplify (compounding, conversion, etc.)

The more of these kinds of operations the learner does the better, since (as we saw in the last chapter) the more decisions the learner makes about a word the greater the depth of processing.

A great advantage of working from texts is that the words that are to be focused on are already in context, hence their meanings may be clearer than if presented as isolated words in a list. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the shared context will bring words together that are commonly associated. In the following text, for example, there are a number of words associated with time, crime and the law.

An approach to focusing on these features might be:

- ✓ Ask students to read the text and to answer comprehension questions to gauge level of understanding. For example:
  1. The maximum time you can be detained without charge is:
    - a. 24 hours
    - b. 36 hours
    - c. 60 hours
  2. You can be detained for 36 hours only if:
    - a. serious arrest able offence has been committed,
    - b. a magistrate gives permission,
    - c. further questioning is necessary.
- ✓ Ask learners (working together and using dictionaries) to underline all words relating to legal processes, and to categorize these according to a) people, b) processes.
- ✓ Ask them to use dictionaries to make verbs for these nouns: limit, detention, charge, offence, questioning, suspect, and to make nouns of these verbs: arrest, detain, commit, extend, secure, preserve. Which of the verb forms can take -able to form an adjective?
- ✓ Ask them to circle all time expressions with numbers and note the prepositions used in each case.
- ✓ Ask learners to identify the verbs that fill these slots: \_\_\_\_\_ a person
- ✓ without charge; \_\_\_\_\_ an offence; \_\_\_\_\_ a suspect in custody;
- ✓ \_\_\_\_\_ a suspect before a magistrate; \_\_\_\_\_ a time limit.
- ✓ Ask learners to rewrite the passage in 'plain English', e.g. as if they were explaining it to a friend. Alternatively, ask them to translate it into their own language.

- ✓ Learners then use the rewritten (or translated) passage as a basis for reconstructing the original text. They then compare the reconstruction with the original.
- ✓ A follow-up activity might be to ask learners to research and summarize this aspect of the legal system in their own country (respecting, of course, their cultural sensitivities).

To summarize, then: the teaching of the grammar of word formation and word combination can be approached from two directions: early instruction in the rules, or the learning of a quantity of vocabulary items from which these rules are slowly distilled. We have looked at the case for a midway position that recognizes the need for early exposure but at the same time accepts that consciousness-raising through focused attention can speed up the process of 'getting a feel for it'. Plentiful exposure plus consciousness-raising is a key principle underlying what has come to be known as a lexical approach.

### **The list of used literature**

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6. Dictionary, 1956 and H.C. Wyld. The Universal English Dictionary, 1952.
7. O.Akhmanova, (ed) "Lexicology: Theory and Method" M, 1972 p. 381