

METHODOLOGY

VOCABULARY NETWORKS:**A NEW WAY
OF ACTIVATING VOCABULARY**

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Teaching and learning vocabulary is arguably one of the most important aspects in English language teaching. Vocabulary gives learners the opportunity to communicate on a basic level even if they don't know how to form a good sentence or how to differentiate between verb tenses. In fact, according to research, knowing as little as the 2000 most frequent words in the English language (out of the estimated total of over a million words) allows learners to understand over 80 % of vocabulary in any non-specialised English text.

Undoubtedly, classroom time can be well spent on making sure that learners have a good grasp of those 2000 words. If one learned only 3 words per day, it would take less than 2 years to master this much. Yet it takes most learners much longer to attain such a level of comprehension.

In this article, we are going to look at why this might be the case and how vocabulary acquisition can be made more efficient.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO KNOW A WORD?**

Unfortunately, knowing a word is not a box where a learner can simply put a tick or a cross. There are many different aspects of a word to be learned. This includes a word's spelling, pronunciation, meaning (often multiple meanings), register (formal, informal or neutral), collocations (i.e. which words it can go together with), grammatical features (e.g. part of speech, regular/irregular forms) etc.

What this means for our classrooms is that we cannot expect students to 'learn' a word at once, since it takes time for their memories to acquire all the information and to develop the ability not only to recognise, but also to produce it appropriately.

HOW TO PRESENT NEW VOCABULARY?

The first encounter with new vocabulary is a chance for the teacher to help learners make connections between a word's form and meaning. It is generally accepted in modern ELT methodology to follow a sequence of three steps commonly called **MPF** (*Meaning, Pronunciation, Form*).

1. Meaning

First, we need to make sure that students understand the meaning of the words we are going to teach. There are numerous ways of doing this.

To help lower-level learners understand the meaning of new words, it is desirable to use visuals and demonstrations. For vocabulary which is difficult to demonstrate or show, simple translation is also a good option. As learners become more advanced, they can benefit from verbal explanations, examples, stories and definitions in English.

A technique, which can make learners more engaged in acquiring new vocabulary, is *Concept Checking Questions (CCQs)*. CCQs are used to confirm comprehension of a vocabulary item and are usually related to the key aspects of a word's meaning. For example, for the word 'handsome' you might ask the following CCQs: *Does a handsome person look good or bad? (good), Do we usually say a woman or a girl is handsome? (no, a man or a boy).*

2. Pronunciation

As soon as students understand the meaning of the new vocabulary, it is time to focus their attention on pronunciation. Although the most common way of teaching



pronunciation, which is drilling, is usually considered a dull activity, there are ways of making it more engaging. The *fun drilling* technique involves dividing students into groups by various criteria. For example, you might ask only boys/girls, students with curly hair, students wearing something green to repeat after you.

3. Form

Finally, having understood the meaning and practised the pronunciation of the new word, students are ready to write down its form. Teaching form usually involves writing or demonstrating the word on the board and pointing out any potential spelling problems. This is also an opportunity to discuss the grammatical features of a word, i.e. what part of speech it is, any irregular forms it has (plural, past participle, comparative forms), prefixes or suffixes it might take etc.

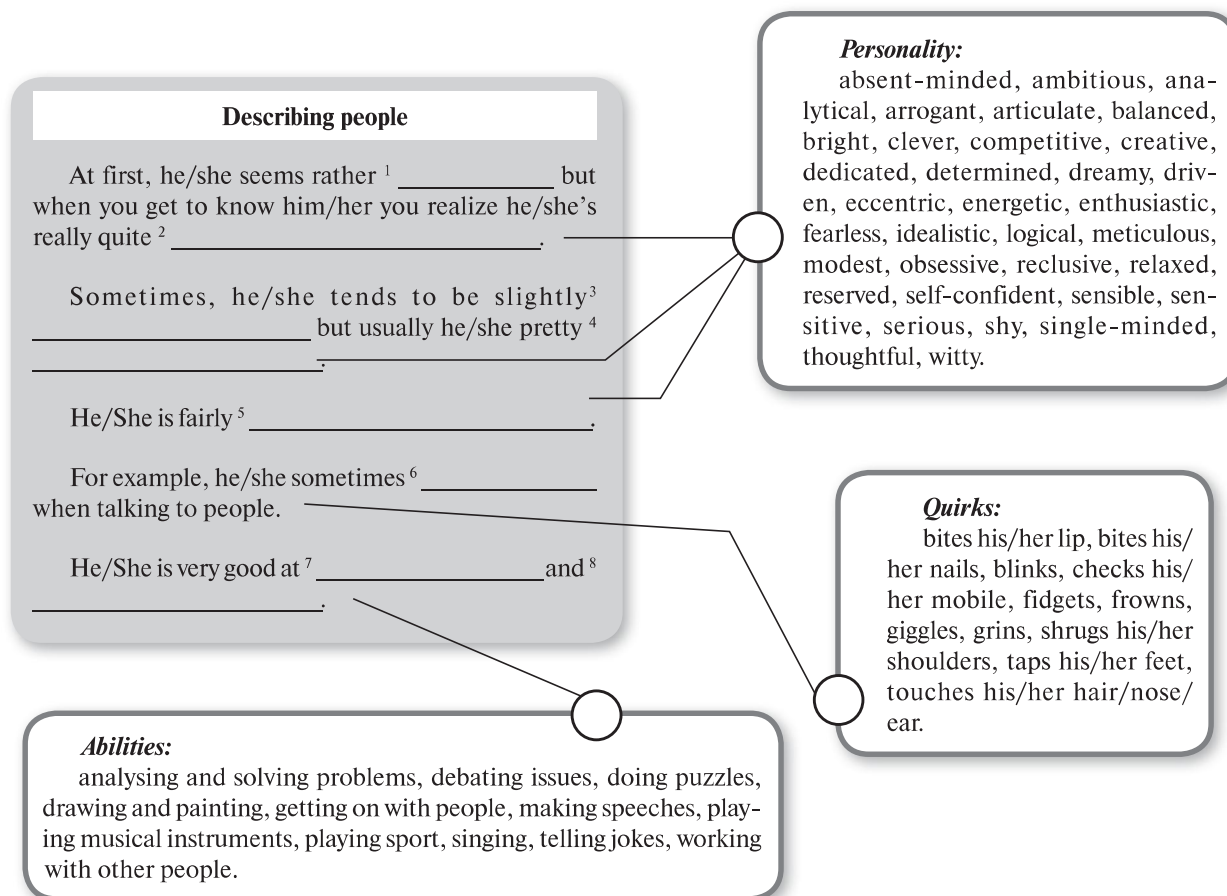
VOCABULARY NETWORKS

According to research, related words form complex networks in the minds of language users. This means that every new word is added to a mental topical group of related words. Activating one of the items from a group or

adding a new one affects the whole network. Therefore, it makes sense to teach new words in groups related to the same topic. This approach is called *Vocabulary Networks* and is often implemented in some authentic coursebooks as in the example below.

The vocabulary network on describing people (Picture 1), which is designed for upper-intermediate students, involves several lexical sets (*Personality, Abilities, Quirks*) related to the topic. While the ‘*Personality*’ set is comprised entirely of adjectives, the other groups contain common phrases and collocations, which are necessary for learners to use new vocabulary appropriately. It may appear that some of the suggested phrases are easy for upper-intermediate students (e.g. *singing, working with other people*). However, the ultimate aim of learning new vocabulary is to be able to speak on a topic, which requires activating the entire network of vocabulary available for this purpose including the words that students already know.

In addition to this, in the top left box (*Describing people*) there is a description model providing essential functional language, which in combination with new vocabulary will enable learners to describe their friends or other people they know.



Picture 1. Choices Upper-Intermediate, Students' Book. Michael Harris, Anna Sikorzyńska, (2013), Pearson Education Limited

Although it is convenient to have such ready-made networks, they are not always provided even in modern coursebooks. In this case a network could be created either by a teacher or by students themselves. Have your students brainstorm their own lexical sets and then suggest some new vocabulary (using MPF) that they can add to their networks. Then the whole class can negotiate the most appropriate categorisation and create the final network on the board or a poster.

THE BENEFITS OF VOCABULARY NETWORKS

1. Vocabulary is activated around one topic, strengthening mental connections between lexical items in students' minds.
2. Vocabulary is practised at word level, as well as at phrase and sentence levels, providing step-by-step support for speaking at length.
3. Numerous opportunities for communicative activities (see below).

HOW TO USE A VOCABULARY NETWORK?

A vocabulary network is a useful resource for efficient vocabulary acquisition, and it can be used in a variety of ways. Below are some suggestions of activities.

1. Brainstorming: ask students to think of words for each category in the network before they see it. You can give them a time limit and make it competitive. If this is too difficult, you can provide a list of words from different categories mixed together and ask students to categorise them appropriately. Additionally, you can let your students add their own ideas to the given lists of words.

2. Personalisation: ask students to tick the words which apply to them and then let them discuss the details in pairs.

3. Pair/group work:

- *guessing:* one student thinks of a word and describes it without naming it, the others try to guess the word
- *miming:* one student demonstrates a word with gestures while the others guess
- *20 questions:* one student thinks of a word, the others need to ask up to 20 'yes/no' questions to guess what it is.

4. Ranking: ask students to rank the items in the vocabulary network according to their importance, value etc. or categorise words according to specific criteria.

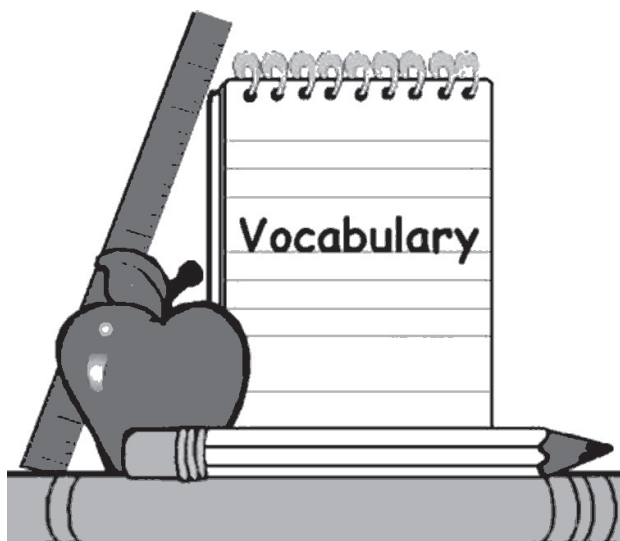
5. Spelling games: suggest students to choose up to 10—15 words from the network and jumble the letters or make a crossword or riddle with them. Then ask students to exchange their tasks.

KEEP RECYCLING

No matter how efficiently we present new vocabulary, our brains need repeated encounters and opportunities to generate new lexical items over a period of time to ensure they enter our long-term memory. Vocabulary recycling can be incorporated into every lesson in the form of a warmer or a short game and will be most effective if it involves personalisation, i.e. using active vocabulary to talk about a personal experience. All in all, effective presentation and practice together with regular recycling will ensure that your students have the ability to use new vocabulary in appropriate contexts.

References

- Thornbury, S. (2002) *How to Teach Vocabulary*. Pearson Education Limited
- Harris, M., Sikorzyńska, A. (2013) *Choices Upper-Intermediate, Students' Book*. Pearson Education Limited



Picture: cdn.psychologytoday.com