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Keeping them interested

Lucia Maffione considers how to motivate children when teaching vocabulary.

In his book on teaching vocabulary, Scott Thornbury quotes Wilga Rivers, a leading authority on second language learning, who wrote some years ago: 'Vocabulary cannot be taught. It can be presented, explained, included in all kinds of activities, and experienced in all manner of associations ... but ultimately it is learned by the individual. As language teachers, we must arouse interest in words and a certain excitement in personal development in this area ...'

This certainly does not mean that the teacher is redundant. On the contrary, the teacher should play a pivotal role in motivating young learners during their vocabulary acquisition because only motivation will sustain them as they carry out this complex learning process with its long-term goals. By *complex learning process*, I mean the understanding of new words and the ability to store them and afterwards to retrieve and use them in appropriate situations.

Motivating young learners to enrich their own vocabulary is undoubtedly a challenging task for teachers. Consequently, some simple directions about how to make vocabulary activities motivating may be helpful.

Elicitation

As Scott Thornbury points out, 'young learners need to be actively involved in

the learning of words'. One technique that might achieve this involvement is *elicitation*.

A standard elicitation procedure is for the teacher to present the meaning of a word (eg by showing a flashcard) and to ask the learners to supply the form. For example:

T: (showing a picture of a skyscraper)
What's this?

S: *Building?*

T: *Not exactly.*

S: *Skyscraper?*

T: *Good.*

This activity maximises speaking opportunities and involves the learners, keeping them alert and attentive.

Personalisation

Another important way to involve and motivate learners is to make them personalise new lexical items.

Personalisation is the process of using new words in a context that is real for the learner. According to Scott Thornbury, even unmotivated learners will remember words if they have been set tasks that require them to make decisions about them. The teacher can use tasks that ask students to think about their personal response to words. One such activity is *subjective*

categorisation, where students have to categorise a list of new words which the teacher has just introduced and explained. These categories might be *Friendly/Unfriendly* or *I like/I dislike*. Afterwards, the students compare their own answers with those of a partner to see if they agree. In so doing, they express their own points of view, and, at the same time, practise the new words. As Gough points out, it is important that students do not agree all the time so that they have something to talk about.

Peer teaching

Another motivating activity is *peer teaching*, in which students teach vocabulary items to each other. The teacher might, for example, divide the class into small groups and give each student a piece of paper with a newly-encountered word written on it, together with a definition from a monolingual dictionary. Each person has to make the other members of the group guess their word without actually saying it. Techniques and strategies they might employ include using synonyms, antonyms, mime, drawing, comparison, etc. Students generally enjoy this activity because guessing words is motivating and to succeed they have to communicate with each other.



Fun

A further feature to consider is the importance of *fun*.

The learning experience should involve as much fun (or at least enjoyment and satisfaction) as possible. Students (and many teachers) often think that to be effective, learning tasks have to be boring. In fact, the opposite is the case because it has been shown that a relaxed atmosphere may facilitate the learning process. The simplest way to provide fun vocabulary activities is to play games in the classroom. Here is an example of a very nice game, useful both for practising vocabulary and encouraging students to produce language.

Hot seat

First, the class is divided into two teams. The students sit facing the board. An empty chair – one for each team – is put at the front, facing the team members. These chairs are the 'hot seats'. One member from each team has to come to the front and sit in the chair so that they are facing their team-mates and have their backs to the board. The teacher has a list of vocabulary items that students will use in this game. The teacher writes the first word from the list clearly on the board. The aim of the game is for the teams to describe that word using synonyms, antonyms, definition, mime, etc to the student who is in the hot seat. When students are in the hot seat, they cannot see the word on the board and must listen to their team-mates and try to guess the word from the clues they are given. The first hot-seat student to say the word wins a point for their team. Then a new member of each team sits in their team's hot seat. The teacher then writes the next word on the board.

This activity is motivating because it requires both mental and physical involvement from the students. The importance of physical activity is often overlooked in language teaching, and it is beneficial in encouraging students to be both mentally and physically active, rather than just sitting passively. This is also a very *student-centred* activity because the teacher acts only as a facilitator.



Philip Burrows

Different contexts

Another important way to motivate students in vocabulary activities is to introduce and use words within *different contexts*.

Lexical competence doesn't consist simply of remembering a set of vocabulary items. It involves mastering the use of them in appropriate contexts.

When learning new words, students need to recognise how and where they can be used. This goal may be achieved through roleplays. Here is an example.

Door to door salesman

This is a pairwork activity. In each pair, one student plays at being a salesperson who tries to sell objects to the other student, who pretends to be a potential client. To make this activity work, it will be necessary to pre-teach some expressions which will enable the students to accomplish the task. For example: (for the client) *I don't need it, I am busy, I can't afford it ...* (for the salesperson) *It could improve your life, you can try it, you can have a refund ...*

The essential thing about roleplays is that they provide a memorable way to use new words or expressions. In this respect, they are helpful both for learners trying to memorise new words and for teachers who want to maintain their

students' motivation. Moreover, through this activity students are encouraged to focus on the use of the language rather than on the language itself.



Elicitation, personalisation, peer teaching, games and roleplays are just some strategies to motivate the learners when you are using vocabulary teaching activities. Whilst these techniques cannot force the students to learn new words, they can at least ensure the learners' willing participation in the learning process. **ETP**

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