

## **Practical Classroom Activities For Vocabulary Development**

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Having something important to say, but not knowing how to express the idea clearly, is a terribly frustrating experience which all of us have probably had at one time or another. Imagine the frustration our EFL students must deal with, not just occasionally, but every time they try to communicate. They need to deal simultaneously with all kinds of linguistic limitations: structure, word order, and pronunciation, just to mention a few. Not having an adequate vocabulary is an additional, and I believe, largely unnecessary obstacle to effective communication for our students.

Vocabulary development is an area that is often under-emphasized in EFL teaching. Teachers may do an excellent job of the initial presentation of vocabulary items, but unless sufficient follow-up activities are programmed, students are unlikely to achieve long-term retention of the new words.

In this article ten different activities for follow-up and practice of new vocabulary items are described. All of the activities are based on the premise that it is active mental involvement with vocabulary words which enhances their retention in long-term memory. In many of these activities, competition or a game format is used to encourage this active involvement. Winning or losing, however, is in no way important except as it motivates students to become mentally involved with the words being practiced.

An important feature of all these activities is that they require only very simple, inexpensive materials and relatively limited teacher preparation time.

Perhaps the most important objective of all of the vocabulary activities presented here is to promote a change in students' attitude towards words. A successful vocabulary lesson, in my opinion, is one which leaves students feeling curious and enthusiastic about words. It is one which starts

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students off on a life-long habit of cultivating vocabulary development. This is admittedly a very tall order. However, it is important to remember that as we strive to achieve this goal, we are providing our students with a tool which will permit them to think and to communicate more clearly and more powerfully .

### **Vocabulary Ping-Pong**

1. On the board write a list of vocabulary words which the class has been studying.
2. Divide students into two teams. Give each team a supply of slips of paper (1 1/2" x 11" is a suitable size.)
3. Establish a fixed period of time for each team to formulate questions using the words on the board. Encourage students of each team to subdivide into pairs or small groups in order to maximize participation. For this step, students may freely consult their class notes, dictionaries, or other students in order to resolve doubts about meanings of words.
4. Instruct students to write each question on a separate slip of paper, fold the paper in half, and place the questions in a box or basket.
5. Arrange the teams so that students are facing each other in two lines. Place the baskets of questions on chairs between the two teams.
6. A student from team "A" comes to the center and draws a question from team "B's" basket. If the student answers correctly, team "A" gets +1 point. If the question is incorrectly formulated, team "B" gets -1 point.
7. The game continues back and forth with a student from team "B" drawing and answering a question from team "A's" basket.
8. The team with the most points wins.

### **Hollywood, Here We Come**

1. Ask students to work in pairs or in small groups to prepare dialogues to illustrate vocabulary items which the group has been studying. This exercise works well with vocabulary for types of people, occupations, idioms, phrasal verbs, etc.

2. Students take turns acting out their dialogues for the rest of the class. Their classmates must guess which particular vocabulary item they are representing.

### **A Penny For Your Thoughts**

1. Write individual vocabulary words on small cards and place them in a box or basket.
2. Ask students to draw a card and speak nonstop for 30 seconds on the first thoughts that come to mind in relation to the vocabulary word.
3. To make this exercise a little more fun, add music. Have the students sit in a circle and pass the basket around while the music is playing. The student holding the basket when the music stops must draw a card and begin to speak.

### **First To The Front**

1. Prepare a numbered set of incomplete sentences each using a different vocabulary word. Make copies for all students.

Example: *You are unscrupulous if you \_\_\_\_\_.*  
*Only an intrepid person would want to \_\_\_\_\_.*

2. Divide students into 3 or 4 teams. If possible, move desks to one side of the room so that each team has space to form a “huddle”.
3. Divide the blackboard into sections for each team. Give each team a marker or piece of chalk.
4. Call out a number. One person from each team has to go to the board and write the word or phrase which correctly completes the corresponding sentence. The first team to answer correctly wins a point.
5. To make this exercise more challenging, use numbers which are easily confused to identify the sentences. Instead of numbering consecutively, mix in numbers like 16, 60, 66, etc.

For a variation on this exercise, have students work individually. Circulate around the classroom and ask students to draw a numbered square of paper from a box or basket. Students must answer the question which corresponds to the number drawn.

### **Take Your Pick**

1. Prepare a set of small cards (3" x 1" is a suitable size). Write a vocabulary word which the group has been studying on each card. Place the cards in a small box or basket.
2. Ask students to number off by 3's or 4's in order to form teams.
3. Place the cards in the front of the room at an equal distance from all teams. At the signal "Go", one student from each team comes to the front, draws a card, and writes a sentence using the word on the board. The sentence must include enough context to make the meaning of the vocabulary word clear.
4. Students may consult with their teammates before writing the sentence, but only one person from each team should be at the board at a time.
5. Allow the competition to continue for as long as desired. When time is up, all students take their seats and listen as the sentences are checked. This provides a good opportunity to illustrate potential errors in usage of the vocabulary words.

### **Synonyms And Antonyms**

1. Divide students into 3-4 teams. Mark off a section of the blackboard for each team. Give each team a marker or piece of chalk.
2. Write sets of 5-10 vocabulary words on each section of the board. Use different words for each team.
3. Give students 2-3 minutes to write a synonym for each word in their set.
4. Suspend the competition for a few minutes to check the answers. Each correct synonym counts for one point. Correct any incorrect responses, and leave correct answers on the board.
5. For the second round of competition each team moves to a different section of the board. Teams are given 2-3 minutes to add an additional synonym to each set.
6. Repeat step 4.

7. For the third round of competition each team again moves to a different section of the board. This time they are given 2-3 minutes to write an antonym for each word.
8. Repeat step 4.
9. If there is time and/or interest for an additional round of competition, ask students to add a noun to go with each adjective, a verb to go with each adverb, or to write a short phrase or sentence with each word.

### **Vocabulary Review In Action**

1. Write a list of 20-30 vocabulary words which the class has been studying on the board. Number the words. Be sure to include some relatively easy words and some more challenging words.
2. Divide the class into teams of 4-5 students. Give each team a supply of slips of paper (1 1/2" x 11" is a suitable size).
3. Instruct students to choose words from the list on the board and write as many original sentences as possible within a set time limit (8-10 minutes). Each sentence should be written on a separate slip of paper. Encourage students to work together as a team.
4. Call out a number. The first student who reaches the front of the room with a sentence using the word corresponding to the number called has the opportunity to read his/her sentence. If the sentence is logical, meaningful, and grammatically correct, his/her team gets a point. If the sentence is in any way incorrect, the second student to reach the front with a sentence is given a chance.
5. This exercise can be made more challenging by requiring students to include enough context in their sentences to make the meaning of the word obvious.
6. The team with the most points wins.

### **Cognates: True Or False?**

1. Prepare a list of sentences using both true and false cognates. Write each sentence on an index card. Place the cards in a small box or basket.

2. Ask students to work with a partner or in small groups. Provide them with basic drawing materials (paper, colored pencils, markers, or crayons).
3. Ask each pair or group of students to select a card and illustrate the sentence. Sample sentences might be:
  - Students were required to assist class.*
  - Students were required to attend class.*
  - My music teacher has a bigot.*
  - The policeman raised up an infraction for obstructing traffic.*
4. Allow class time for students to show and comment on their drawings or post them on the class bulletin board for everyone to admire.

### **Phrasal Verb Bingo**

1. Prepare the bingo cards by dividing sheets of paper into 16 squares of equal size. You will need one card for each student.
2. Write a definition for a phrasal verb which the class has studied in each square. Use a total of 30-40 different phrasal verbs.
3. Write each phrasal verb on a small card. Place the cards in a box, basket, or bag.
4. Draw out cards one by one. Call out the phrasal verb and use it in a sentence.
5. Students who have the corresponding definition on their cards should pencil in the phrasal verb in the appropriate square.
6. The first student to complete an entire row or column is the winner.

### **Cluster If You Can**

1. Write sentences using vocabulary words on slips of paper or index cards. All of the vocabulary words should be related in some way to a general theme or lesson studied.
2. Give each student a sentence.

3. Instruct students to walk about the room and form clusters of related words. For example a study of words related to the general topic of sports might yield the following clusters:
4. Finish the activity by asking each cluster to identify itself and explain how the words are related.

### **Tips For Using The Activities**

#### ***Class Control***

An advantage of almost all of the activities presented here is that they provide opportunities for students to be up, active, and moving about. Another advantage is that they are activities which have proven to generate high levels of student motivation and enthusiasm. The problem, of course, is how to keep this enthusiasm from getting out of bounds. Here are three suggestions:

1. Establish the rule that only one person from each team may be standing up at a time. Then establish and enforce a penalty for violations (for example, minus one point from the team's score).
2. Tell students that part or all of an activity must be done in total silence and that they will lose points for talking. Each team can begin the competition with a certain number of free points. The teacher then just erases points for each violation of the silence period.
3. Pay careful attention to the length of time allotted for each activity. The optimal time will vary according to students' age and maturity levels. It's always better to stop while students are still eagerly participating than to prolong the activity and end up with a free-for-all.

#### ***Group Dynamics***

An additional advantage of this type of activities is that they are useful for developing the kind of group unity or esprit de corps which can enhance overall learning experiences in a group. Here are some suggestions:

1. At the beginning of a term, make getting to know each other an essential part of all team activity. Allow 1-2 minutes of the competition specifically for this purpose. Then quiz students for extra team points. For example, choose one student at random from each team. If he/she knows the

name (or name and one other bit of information) of each teammate, the team is awarded an extra point.

2. Later on in the term, ask teammates to make a list of things they have in common. Give an extra point to the team that comes up with the longest list.
3. From time to time, finish up a competition by asking students to write or say something nice about each of their teammates.
4. Ask each team to identify itself with name or logo. This can even be used as additional vocabulary practice.
5. Use the activities to encourage students to learn from one another. This will help to build group or community spirit and will prevent weaker students from feeling embarrassed or put on the spot.

### ***Extending the Activities***

Although these activities have been designed to provide practice with vocabulary which is already familiar to students, creative teachers will find that they also can provide meaningful contexts for introducing new vocabulary items. For example, the activity *A Penny For Your Thoughts* takes its name from the corresponding English idiom meaning, “Please tell me what’s on your mind. What are you thinking about?”

Many of the activities involve having students compete in teams. Asking students to come up with a distinctive, creative name for their team is another fun (and painless) way to include extra vocabulary words which students will be highly motivated to remember.