

Dealing with unknown vocabulary

During reading and listening tasks, we usually encourage learners not to focus on unknown vocabulary items when these are not essential to the tasks we've set. However, it can be useful – and emotionally satisfying – for learners to explore unknown vocabulary after they've done the reading tasks and arrived at an overall understanding of the text. This post-reading / listening procedure for dealing with unknown vocabulary combines training in prioritisation, peer teaching, guessing meaning from form and context, and the use of dictionaries.

Prioritisation

Learners have just completed a series of reading / listening tasks from the coursebook. Ask them to work alone, read the text (in the case of listening, this will be the listening script at the back of the book), and find vocabulary items – words or expressions – which they don't know (or are not sure of) and would like to learn.

Important: in order to train learners in prioritisation for learning new vocabulary efficiently, their workload needs to be manageable. It is a good idea to set a limit on the number of items they can choose (e.g. no more than three).

Peer teaching

In pairs, learners show each other the items they've chosen and see if their partner knows (or has some idea) of the meanings. Repeat in groups of four (two pairs). Finally, have all the learners stand up, mingle, and try to find someone who can help them with any remaining items. By the end of this stage, you may find that many of the learners' queries have been answered (or all of them! – in which case, skip the next stage).

Using formal and contextual clues

Ask learners to shout out any words or expressions they're still unsure of. Write them on the board. In pairs or small groups, learners go back to the text, find the items, and discuss these questions:

- 1 What part of speech is the word? (noun, verb, adjective, ...)
- 2 How do you know? (think about the beginning and end of the word, and where it comes in the sentence).
- 3 Read the whole paragraph around the word. Then guess what the word might mean. Make two guesses for each word.

The aim of 1 is to show learners how they can look at the form of a word (e.g. prefixes and suffixes like *un-*, *re-*, *-ism*, *-ed*) and its place in a sentence (e.g. after an article) to work out the part of speech. 2 then encourages learners to look at contextual clues in making sensible guesses about meaning.

Round off this stage by comparing and discussing the learners' ideas as a class. Avoid commenting at this stage on whether the learners' ideas are correct.

Dictionaries

Learners check their ideas from Stages 2 and 3 in a dictionary. Encourage learners to ask you about any items they're still unsure of, and be prepared to provide further clarification as necessary. Stages 1 to 3 should mean that you don't get queries about too many items!

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Written record (and prioritisation again)

Finally, learners make a written record of words and expressions they've learnt in the earlier stages. Encourage them to make use of information from the dictionary. They should note down at least one definition and example sentence for each item.

Again, set a limit to the number of items learners can note down (e.g. ask them to choose five). Encourage them to consider which items – for them – are most important, useful or interesting.

You can round off this stage by having learners compare which items they chose to note down in pairs or small groups and briefly explain their choices.