

Teaching new language – vocabulary, grammar and functions

Whatever the level of the class, and however the teacher arranges the study phase of the lesson, there are four things that students need to do with new language; be exposed to it, understand its meaning, understand how it's constructed and be able to practise and produce it.

Grammar is often said to be the tree trunk and branches of a language while vocabulary and functions are the leaves that add beauty and variety. Certainly one does not appear so attractive and appealing without the others and one in isolation isn't truly effective. Therefore we have to ensure that students are introduced to new language in a balanced and manageable way.

Some lessons that we teach may include new grammar, vocabulary and functions. More often than not lessons will introduce, or be specifically focused on, just one area.

We can easily apply our ESA methods to introduce new language. Lessons that are specifically targeted to grammar or vocabulary commonly use the 'straight arrow' ESA approach, whereas functions-based lessons are more commonly approached with 'boomerang' or 'patchwork' ESA structures. This is certainly not a rule that has to, or even should, be followed. An effective teacher will think about which structure is most appropriate to the class and to the language that will be introduced.

After you have digested the information in this unit, complete the worksheet.



Teaching Vocabulary

Vocabulary is very important to the students, especially at the early stages when students are motivated to learn the basic words they need to get by in the language.

As a rule, a learner's receptive (words the student knows but doesn't use) vocabulary is much larger than his or her productive (words the student knows and uses) vocabulary; the students can usually understand many more words than they can actively use.

How easy or difficult a vocabulary item is will largely depend on a number of factors:

- Similarity to students' own language
- Similarity to English words already known
- Spelling and pronunciation
- Appropriacy



Selecting Vocabulary

Whilst there is a general consensus about which grammatical structures should be taught at which levels the same is not true of vocabulary. One of the biggest problems of vocabulary teaching is how to select which words to teach. Although the teacher is generally guided by the course and teacher's book, the following criteria can be used:

- Appropriacy to the students
- Appropriacy to the task
- Frequency and coverage – how often are the students likely to use/come across the language and can it be applied to different situations (The Cobuild English Dictionary gives some very helpful frequency information.)
- Teachability – for example, beginner students need very clear and visual language

What do students need to know about a vocabulary item?

- Meaning – what it means
- Use – how/when it is appropriate to use
- Word grammar – where it belongs
- Interaction – how it interacts and affects other words
- Spelling – how it is written
- Pronunciation – how it is spoken

Techniques for vocabulary teaching

Engage

The following methods can all be used to help engage the students and to elicit/explain meaning

- Realia
- Mime and action
- Pictures
- Contrast
- Discussion
- Discovery



Study

Study activities can include:

- Gap-fill exercises
- Word searches
- Crosswords
- Matching exercises
- Example sentences
- Pronunciation exercises such as drilling
- Study from texts and dialogues

Activate

The activate stage of a vocabulary lesson may include such activities as:

- Open class, small group or pair discussion
- Role-play
- Simulation
- Story building
- Material production task (poster, advertisement, etc.)
- Debate

A typical 'straight arrow' structured ESA vocabulary (for household furniture vocabulary) lesson for lower level students with the learning objective – “At the end of the lesson students will be able to use vocabulary associated with houses, rooms and furniture” might look something like this:

- Engage** Open class activity where students share information about where they live, type of house they live in, rooms they have. Maybe students can be asked in the lesson before to bring pictures or draw a floor plan to show other students. If this is likely to create any social discomfort, the teacher can bring a picture of his/her house, or houses in general, for discussion.
- Study** Teacher shows a small text, or plays dialogue, of someone describing their house. Checks pronunciation, spelling, meaning, etc with some of the study activities mentioned above.
- Activate** Teacher tells small groups or pairs of students that they can design their perfect house, complete with furnishings, money no object. Later students present their 'dream' house to the class and the class has a discussion on pros and cons of each house before voting on which house they would like to live in.

Please note that this isn't the *right* way to approach it. It is just one way. There are many other ways of achieving the same end. A patchwork structured approach can be seen in unit 3.



Introducing grammatical structures

Which new language structures we introduce are largely determined by the level of the class and the course syllabus we are using. However, in all cases, the students will need to know what the language means, how it is used, what the grammatical form is and how it is said/written.

- Meaning – what the language means
- Use – how/when it is used
- Forms and Patterns – formation and patterns of the language
- Spoken and written form – any differences in forms. For example in written form 'I am going to.....' often becomes 'I'm gonna.....' in spoken form.

Techniques for presenting and practising language structures

Engage

- Discussion
- Scenario building
- Prompting
- Question and answer
- Using pictures, drawings, real objects, mime, etc.

Study

- Intonation and pronunciation patterns
- Looking at the language in context through texts and dialogues
- Choral and individual repetition (drilling)
- Gap fills
- Information gaps
- Sentence word order activities (unscramble jumbled sentences, etc.)
- Sentence building

Activate

- Communication games
- Role-play
- Story building
- Discussion/debate

A typical ESA patchwork grammar lesson for mid level students with the learning objective – “At the end of the lesson students will be able to talk/write about films and books using the past simple tense.”:

Engage Students discuss favourite books/films, what they liked about them, etc. If teacher has told them in advance, they can bring copies in.

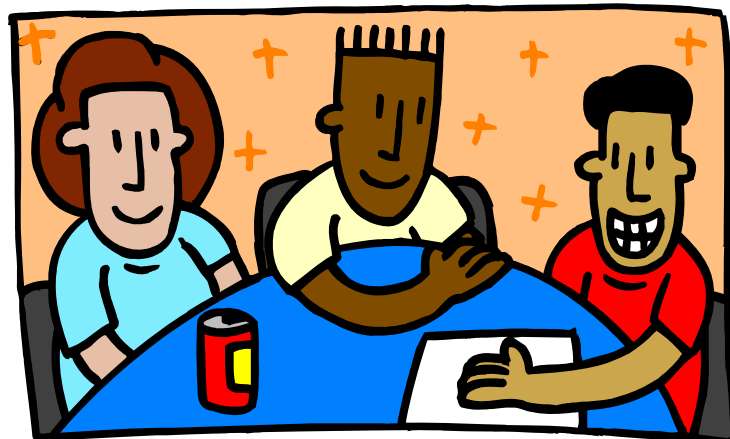
Activate In pairs students write brief synopsis of a book or film they have seen.

Study From the synopsis, analyze the usage of the past simple tense. Further study activities to reinforce meaning, formation and pronunciation.

Activate In groups students write short story from picture prompts.

Study Group passes story to another group who check for correct usage of past tense. Any errors discussed/analyzed in class.

Activate Chain story communication game. One student starts the story, the next continues, and so on.



Teaching language functions

As well as vocabulary and grammar, language also consists of functions. Language functions include areas such as inviting, refusing, agreeing and disagreeing, suggesting, etc. Teaching language functions also includes the appropriacy (or appropriateness) of the language in terms of the kind of language they use – formal, informal, tentative, technical etc.



Language function lessons will stress the need for activation of language and is perhaps most effectively used with the boomerang and patchwork type ESA lessons that we saw in unit 3. Certainly role-plays are very useful here.

A typical function (inviting in this case) ESA boomerang type lesson could be:

Engage Students talk in open class about their favourite leisure activities, why they like them, how often they do them etc. Teacher uses prompts to get students opinions on certain other activities.

Activate Students walk around class inviting peers to join them in their favourite activities until they have found at least two students who would like to do so.

Study Teacher and students listen to invitation dialogue on tape. Compare to the language they used and analyze ways of inviting formally/informally and accepting/rejecting such invitations appropriately. Some pronunciation and other study exercises used to reinforce.

Activate Using new language students role-play in pairs. One wants a date with the other and invites. The other isn't keen on the date so makes excuses. The winner is the student who doesn't run out of invitations or rejections!