

Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Learning

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Biodata

Hazel Watling has been teaching for 8 years. She is currently working for the British Council in Madrid and has worked in the UK, Egypt and Sri Lanka. She enjoys teaching a range of general English levels, as well as EAP. Her main areas of interest are motivating learners, different ways of incorporating vocabulary in the classroom and learner autonomy.

Talk abstract:

Encouraging learner autonomy can be difficult, as it often confounds students' expectations of language learning. This session presents classroom-based research and suggests practical activities to promote learner autonomy when recycling vocabulary inside and outside the classroom. The session is aimed at teachers of adults and teenagers looking to develop their understanding of vocabulary recycling and its link to learner autonomy.

Anki

- Tutorial for installing on Windows / Mac computers - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQkdB3cJwn0&list=PLIkmuYM_WTKdWriIDopN_hqaKtAEUYdoE0
- A quick demo video on how Anki works on a mobile device - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkXbW-G7Y0> (You can install the app from the Play Store or the App Store).

Remember you can also create 'decks' (sets of flashcards) on your computer and sync them to your mobile device.

Vocabulary bag / folder activities.

I'd recommend colour coding your vocabulary cards, depending on what works best for you. Having a different colour for each word class can be tricky, but some teachers do this. I organise mine by term, so there are three colours in total. I then get students to choose which term's vocabulary they want to work on.

The activities that my students voted as their favourites -

- **Pair definitions** - Students race to define as many words to their partner within a time limit.
- **Taboo** - Hand out a vocab card to each student. They need to think of three words they associate with it (writing them down in pencil on the card but not showing their partner), and then define the word for their partner *without* using those three words. Then get students to swap cards around the room so that they repeat the activity using another flashcard.
- **Noughts and crosses / Three in a line** - Draw a grid with nine spaces on the board for three in a line. Use blu-tack to stick nine words from the vocab bag on the board

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(face down). Divide students into two teams and take it in turns to give them a definition. If they get it right, they win the square. If they guess incorrectly, the chance goes to the other team. The winning team is the one to get three in a line.

- **Post it note mingle** - Give each student a post-it note divided in half horizontally and with a happy face at the top and a sad face at the bottom. Then give each student a pile of 8-10 words from the vocabulary bag. The student makes a note of the words he or she knows and can define next to the smiley face and words he or she doesn't know next to the sad face. Students then stick the post-it note onto their top and move around the room looking at other students' post-it notes, explaining and asking about their own and other students' words. This is a great activity if multiple classes of the same level share the vocab bag, or if you often have students missing from class.
- **Tell a story** - Divide students into small groups and put a pile of words in the middle of each group. One student takes a card and begins to tell a story, incorporating the word they have picked up. They should talk for about a minute before another student takes a card (e.g. going clockwise) and continues the story, using their word from the pile. Encourage students to be imaginative; they can take the story in any direction they want!
- **Back to the board** - Divide students into two teams. One student from each team sits with their back to the board. Write a word or phrase from the vocabulary bag on the board and the other students have to give definitions and examples to help the student guess the word. The first person to guess the word wins a point for their team. Change the students with their backs to the board to make sure everyone has a go. I tell my students they can't use L1 or mime for this activity; they must explain the word in English.

Vocabulary 'circuit training'

Set up different vocabulary 'stations' around the room. Students work in one area for a set time before moving to another activity. The teacher decides the time spent at each 'station' and rings a bell or prompts students when it is time to move to another.

Some ideas for 'stations' -

- Flashcard self-testing/pair testing
- Quick matching – definitions and meanings
- Translation matching
- Categorising vocabulary (formal/informal, word class, lexical sets etc.)
- Synonyms / antonyms matching
- Word formation (FCE/CAE/CPE Use of English Part 3)
- Gapped sentences (similar to Use of English Part 1)

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Authentic material reading

I used The Guardian Experience as a source of new vocabulary although the activity also practices spoken fluency and reading skills. The reading texts are high level (C1/C2) but could be adapted for B2. Students are given an article to read at home, and need to summarise it to another student or group in the next lesson. They make a note of interesting vocabulary, expressions, phrases etc. that they find in the text (e.g. 5 or 6) and teach them to their partner/group after summarising the stories. The stories are all real life events and therefore some of the content might not be suitable for your learners. You know your students and what they will enjoy, but later on in the course, they can access the site and choose which story they would like to read themselves. There are approximately 500 stories on the website, and a new one is added every week. Other websites such as BBC News could be used, but as the Experience articles are descriptive, the vocabulary is usually very rich.

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/experience>