

## A “WORD” ABOUT VOCABULARY BUILDING: REMOVING WORD STRESS AND LEARNING THE ART OF BUILDING AND USING WORDS

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### **Abstract:**

*Acquisition of vocabulary is an essential component in language learning and plays a key role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. It has been universally accepted that lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and deficit vocabulary impedes language learning. The present paper attempts to review the trends in teaching strategies that can enhance vocabulary, thereby strengthening communication. It is of vital importance to recognize factors like the type of vocabulary, the target learners, their level of proficiency and level of education that will affect vocabulary building. Based on the input received, teachers need to devise strategies and techniques that offer opportunities to the learner to enrich their word bank. A variety of strategies for vocabulary building have been dealt with in detail - guessing a word from the context, using mnemonic techniques to remember words and using vocabulary cards to remember word pairs- to mention a few. All techniques are learner centric and involve active learner participation. Vocabulary building may seem a problematic and daunting task for teachers, specially because of the lack of instructional strategies and techniques in building the word bank of the learners. The use of suitable material and a blend of the right vocabulary teaching exercises that are suited to the target group, go a long way in enriching the word power of the learners. The technique employed by the teacher should be determined by the context in hand, availability of time and the takeaway or value of the vocabulary words for the learners. The present paper delves into the practical aspects of teaching the art of strengthening the most vital component of communication i.e. vocabulary which constitutes words used in interaction.*

**Keywords:** *Vocabulary, Building, Exercise, Techniques, Strategies, Word, Models.*

### **Introduction:**

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug! stated Mark Twain. When he echoed this sentiment way back in 1890, he probably well realized the value of vocabulary building as the edifice of all language related activities. It is a skill that can make or break a student's attitude and feelings towards language learning. A strong vocabulary undoubtedly contributes to reading comprehension. Vocabulary, as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language, opined Pittelman, S.D., in his book, *Semantic Feature Analysis*. Hence researchers have been turning their attention to vocabulary building as an empowering tool for language acquisition. Limited or poor vocabulary often leads to poor communication and impedes the path to successful language learning. Nation, Smith. in *Learning Vocabulary* has aptly justified the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language as a complimentary one because the enhancement in any one skill automatically grooms the other. An extensive vocabulary enables the use of structures and functions of language that make communication comprehensible. Graves, Michael F. in *The Vocabulary Book: Learning and Instruction*, accurately observe that there is little value in producing grammatically correct statements if one does not have the right vocabulary to convey one's thoughts. While without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without

vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. (97) So, vocabulary mastery is a skill of using words of a language for successful and meaningful communication. Vocabulary learning should not be left to chance but be a trained and sustained effort on part of the learner.

### **Setting vocabulary goals:**

To build a meaningful learners platform while teaching vocabulary, the aim should be to select appropriate contexts and provide a clear instructional list to struggling learners. The selection of vocabulary should be based on linguistic deficiencies and memory deficits of the target group. Keeping these broad frameworks in mind the instructions provided must be explicit. The strategy planned should involve intensive practice so as to enable the learners to integrate the new vocabulary words seamlessly in the already existing word bank. The learning should not be momentary and the student must be able to remember the word when encountered at a later time and in a newer context.

The aim of vocabulary teaching should be to provide the learner with a "start up" or initial word bank based on the different types of words function. Words may serve varied functions based on types- i.e. common words like 'are', 'that'- to content words which include nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs like 'book', 'beautiful', 'good', 'sadly'- to concrete words like 'automobile', 'car', 'truck' - to abstract words like 'honesty', 'harmony' -to general words like 'huge', 'tiny'- that are not associated and limited to a particular content area, and technical words like 'netiquette', 'mitosis'- which are limited to a specific content area. Once the type of to vocabulary words are decided, the strategy evolves. While for concrete words like 'automobile' picture cards may be an effective strategy, teaching abstracts words like 'honesty' would be best reinforced through examples or non examples. The aim while selecting the vocabulary words should be firstly to pick words that one encounters frequently and are needed for general knowledge and avoid lesser used words to prevent confusion and complication in the learning process. The aim should be to develop independent word learners who are able to decipher the meaning of a word by adopting the strategies like guessing / contextual meaning etc. that they have learnt in the process. It is also important to bear in mind the depth to which the learner is required to understand the word that has been selected because some words warrant superficial level of understanding but others may call for a deeper knowledge. When the understanding needs to be thorough, the word needs to be taught and learnt through multiple layers like definitions, synonyms, antonyms and contextual learning and the instructional strategies need to be devised differently so as to enable the students to categorize words and generate sentences. They should be able to make connections between new and prior learning and apply what they have learnt across contexts. Offer students the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary using a variety of learning modalities or formats that actively engage them in the learning process, stated Ellis, E S., & Farmer T., in *The clarifying routine elaborating vocabulary instruction*.

Hence vocabulary is crucial to be mastered in order to express your ideas to others and to be able to comprehend what others are saying. The specificity of any individual's vocabulary knowledge depends on the person and his motivation, desire and need for words, observed Hatch, E & Brown .C., in *Vocabulary Semantics and Language Education*.

### **Contextual redefinition:**

This strategy of enhancing vocabulary allows the learner to use background knowledge, contextual clues and appropriate resources to acquire a new word bank. The activity involves selecting words from a particular area under study that may be unfamiliar to the learners. Then the teacher drafts sentences for each word and the student is allowed to guess the meaning of the word using contextual clues. At the next step the same unfamiliar words are presented in isolation and students elicit their guesses. The teacher now presents the words in sentences that have been written. The students go back to their guesses and predictions, make necessary changes / revisions if they have been wrong, keeping in mind the contextual clues. The learners are encouraged to use additional sources - dictionary, thesaurus , web etc to add to their

learning.

### Sample

Serial Number	Vocabulary word	Original prediction or guess based solely on the word	Revised version based on contextual clues	Actual definition (from resource like dictionary)
1	Accompaniment	On your own	On your own	On your own
2	Accolade	On your own	On your own	On your own
3	Achromatic	On your own	On your own	On your own
4	Acme	On your own	On your own	On your own

### Contextual Redefinition

1. The accompaniment of violin really took the song to a new level of sophistication.
2. Mrs. Sharma is such a great teacher that she is always getting one accolade after another.
3. Since the house was newly built it looked like nobody lived in it due to achromatic walls.
4. At her acme the singer was making over thirty million dollars a year.

### Structural Analysis: -

This technique involves devising visual patterns and meanings that are open to alteration, additions and changes. As the vocabulary evolves - inflectional endings, prefixes and suffixes are used to build on root words and compound words are formed. Learners are trained to identify root words, pronounce them and then gradually build up on the words by adding prefixes and suffixes. The whole technique involves structural analysis and with practice the students learn to unlock the meanings of compound words by considering word parts in the structure of the word. This activity helps students to learn and form newer words and add to their word bank. Put reading first stated Hatch, E & Brown .C. in *Vocabulary Semantics and Language Education*, emphasizing that knowledge of frequently used prefixes and suffixes, base words and root words greatly facilitates learning of many new words. In fact if students learn just the four most common prefixes (un-, re-, in-, dis-) it will provide important clues about the meaning of about two thirds of all English words that have prefixes (38)

An interesting example can be TRISKAIDEKAPHOBIA

### Word parts

Tris	three
Kai	and
Deka	ten
Phobia	Fear of

Used in context: Mr. Sharma refused to stay on the thirteenth floor because he suffered from triskaidekaphobia.

**Another word for consideration:**

PNEUMONULTRAMICROSCOPICSILICOVOLCONOKONISISIS

**Word parts:**

Pneumo	Something to do with lungs
Ultra	extreme
Micro	small
Scopic	observation
Silico	Like sand
Volcano	volcano
Konis	dust
Osis	disorder

**KIM technique:** Key idea, information, memory clue

Kim Technique involves providing a key vocabulary which is critical to the learner's understanding of the required reading selection. The key vocabulary words will include terms that represent the (K) i.e key ideas or concepts related to the reading selection. The learner is provided with (I) i.e important information about the key words - definition, examples and contextual use. Pronunciation is also stressed and the learners are encouraged to paraphrase the meaning and link it to the topic. Then the learner creates (M) a memory clue, which is a mind map by making a simple sketch based on memory connection to explain the word. This is memory clue (M) which helps the learner to fully integrate the meaning of the word into the memory

**KIM**

Key term	Information	Memory clue
Knight	A person of noble birth trained to arms and chivalry.	On your own
Coast	The shore of a sea or ocean	On your own
Convention	A large formal assembly	On your own

**Shades of meaning technique: -**

This is an interesting technique which helps to decipher the subtle differences between related words which can be very confusing for the students. The words may be familiar to the learner, and they may also have a general sense of the difference between, for example, *dejected* and *sorrow* but they may be at loss to use or define these terms in specific ways. They may use these words interchangeably or as synonyms and not comprehend the differences in the shades of meaning. This strategy addresses this need and helps the learners to develop their understanding that many words can be organized in gradients of meaning. The strategy encourages students to talk about words and teach them how to arrange them along a


continuum. As an interesting side note, the ability to distinguish subtle meaning is one of the skills assessed on the scholastic aptitude test, observed Cameron, L in *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. An interesting way to use this strategy is to use paint chips that are usually available for free at hardware stores. Using these paint chips, the students can learn to identify a continuum of words and then write them in the coloured sections of the paint chips.

Semantic gradients				
happy	glad	joyful	thrilled	Ecstatic
warm	hot	boiling	sizzling	Blistering
cool	cold	chilling	frosty	Freezing
big	large	huge	gigantic	humongous

**Frayer's model:** This model includes the concept word, its definition and the characteristics with examples and non examples so that the learner can clearly identify what the concept word is and what the concept word is not. The following chart will simplify the concept.

#### Frayer's Model

Concept Word: **RHOMBUS**

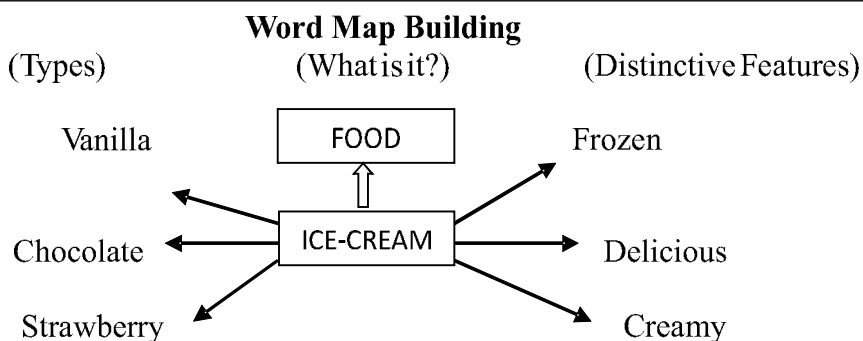
<p><b>Definition</b></p> <p>A rhombus is a special type of parallelogram whose all sides are equal</p>	<p><b>Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different from square because all angles need not be right angels as in square.</li> <li>• All seeds are equal.</li> <li>• Opposite sides are parallel and equal.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>RHOMBUS</b></p>	
<p><b>Examples</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kites</li> <li>• Windows of a car</li> <li>• Section of baseball field</li> </ul>	<p><b>Non examples</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circle</li> <li>• Triangle</li> <li>• Pentagon</li> <li>• Square</li> </ul>

#### Instructional strategies and activities to align with vocabulary building: -

Once the vocabulary words have been strategically selected appropriate instruction should be given to achieve the desired goals.

#### Word map building: -

This technique helps to develop a generalized concept or definition of a particular word. It answers the basic questions about what a thing is, its distinctive features and a few examples associated with it. It helps to define the word and organize information about it.



**Semantic feature analysis:**

This activity helps the students to build relationship between words by putting them into categories. Sameness and uniqueness between the vocabulary words is established, identified and emphasized. For example, let the learner identify a category and then as a second step prepare a list of concepts / objects related to the category. Moving on to the third step, prepare a list of features that are similar to unique to each object / concept. Let all the information be collated in the form of a matrix or flow chart where all objects / concepts fulfilling the requirement are ticked and those lacking are marked appropriately. Encourage the learner to add to both-objects / concepts and features to build the word bank. See the following example:

**Books (Category)**  
**(Objects/ concepts)**

**Features**

Items	Purpose	Approximate pages	Frequency of publication	Approximate cost	Utility
Atlas					
Magazine					
Dictionary					
Encyclopedia					
Almanac					
Scrapbook					

**Animals (category)**  
**(Object/ concept)**

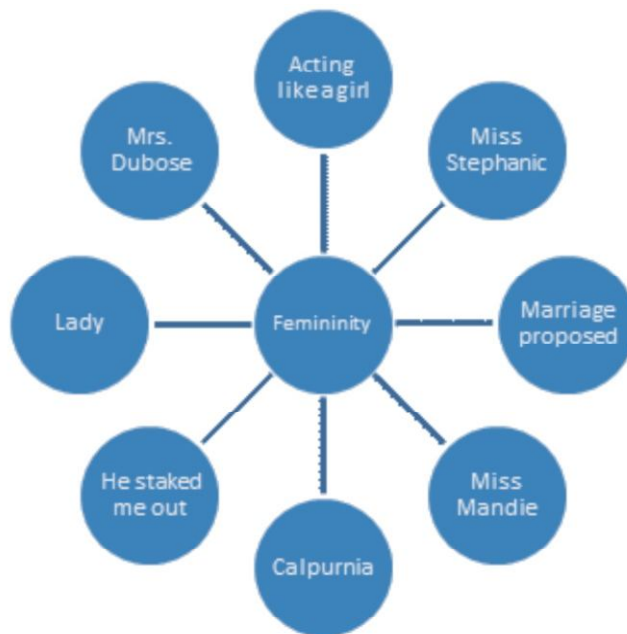
**Features**

Item	4 legs	2 leg	Fur	Eyes	Wings	Birds	Mammals	Reptiles
Parrot								
Cat								
Mouse								
Octopus								

**Cluster web / mind map technique:**

In this technique the teacher picks up a passage related to a particular theme. Before reading the passage, the students are familiarized with a list of words that the students will encounter during the reading- for example if the text in hand is 'To kill a mocking bird', the following word web can be created and the words in the circles will take us further in building and enhancing our word power. Pronunciation is also an area of focus, so is the meaning and association of these words in a contextual framework.

As the learning continues, the learners are encouraged to complete the web and add new words / phrases that will help them improve their learning and comprehension of the text in hand.

**TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD**

(Adapted from Marinak, Moore's, *Vocabulary Instructional Handbook*.1997)

**Treasure Hunt Technique: -**

The students are given a list of essential vocabulary words that they are expected to know when handling a particular unit under study. The students are further grouped and given the task of building on to the existing words by searching for newer words from online sources, reference books, magazines, newspapers etc. The learners are encouraged to build models representing the word and reinforced with points for the variety of sources accessed to search for words and to apply them in sentences of their own. The sources may also be in the form of pictures or illustrations that describe the original words. The process need not be limited to one class but can flow over an entire term. A strategy can be planned to gather representations of words and the progress being made. Thus if a unit deals with Gender, another with caste, race, class or culture- by the end of the term the learners can have a rich word bank supported by new words and an ability to use them in context.

**List group label:**

Under this strategy the teacher selects a main topic or concept that would form the reading selection. The learner is asked to list all words that they can relate to the topic in hand. Since no specific context is provided the word list generated may or may not reflect the meaning of the concept in the reading selection. The class is now divided into groups and each group is expected to collate related terms from the

exhaustive list in hand. This can be done by "grouping" i.e. articulating common features or properties of the words collected in a group. As the next step the learner is asked to suggest a descriptive label for the collated terms. Learners should be able to explain the rationale behind the grouping. Finally, the text selection is read carefully and reviewed keeping in mind the list of words that has been made. As the learners explore the text in hand, they should be able to justify their selection and grouping, else they should eliminate the terms that do not match the concept meaning in the context of the selection. Newer vocabulary words / labels should be sharpened and revised.

Let's understand this with an example. Imagine that a group of learners come up with the following list of words for the concept of "Nutrition".

Health, fitness, vitamins, food,
Proteins, diet, dry fruits, minerals,
Milk, cheese, vegetables, fruits,
Carbohydrates, glow, energetic,
Supplements, longevity, home-cooked,
Less fat, omega3, antioxidants

Now let the students decide how they would group these words. What label would they put on the groups? Can they justify their grouping? The teacher acts as a facilitator throughout the vocabulary building session.

### **Conclusion:-**

There has been tremendous research in teaching vocabulary as a key component of English language learning skills. Innovation, ICT and experimentation has led to substantial improvements in our knowledge about teaching and learning. The strategies and techniques discussed above can be used by learners to improve their learning and help them build their vocabulary banks. Vocabulary building is not something that can be left to chance but calls for sustained efforts and practice. The techniques discussed above are practical ways to improve vocabulary. The aim is to offer these strategies as a resource and valuable contribution to a needed but frequently neglected area.

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