

Teacher, I Need More Words!

Effective Student-Centered Vocabulary Activities



An Alta Book Center Workshop
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Students know it. Teachers know it. And research supports it:

Students need more words!

Vocabulary plays a critical role in our student's lives and expands their future opportunities.

The Snowball Effect

A student with limited vocabulary reads less and listens less, thus limiting the number of new words learned. In contrast, a student who succeeds in learning words will be motivated to listen and read more, thus learning more words, which in turn makes reading and listening easier . . .

and the snowball is rolling!

Workshop Objectives

We'll explore a rich repertoire of activities, paying attention to three stages of vocabulary development:

- A. **Meet the Words:** initial exposure to key words
- B. **Work with Words:** manipulating and playing with words
- C. **Make the Words My Own:** deeper understanding and long-term retention

Some of these activities are suitable for students who learn well alone; others are for small-group or whole-class work.

All of the Activities

- work well in multi-level classes
- create a co-operative classroom community
- increase students' participation and help every student stay on task
- boost self-directed learning and goal-setting; students become more independent word-learners
- activate multiple intelligences
- increase motivation and confidence—and thus increase student retention.
- **need little or no preparation time by the teacher**

These are **repeatable routines**: once you and your students are familiar with an activity, you can do it again and again with different content.

For our students, this builds confidence. They already know what to do, so they are able to plunge right into the language and content of each new lesson.

For teachers, using these routines gives us more time to observe, diagnose, help where needed . . . and sometimes just step back and breathe.

Whatever activity you are doing, multiply the number of times each student practices new words by using interaction patterns that activate every student:

- **Pair-share**
- **Numbered Heads Together**
- **Mingle**
- **Concentric Circle Talk**



Contents

A. **Meet the Words:** initial exposure to key words

Read a Lot!	4
Students Teach a Word	4
Find the Word.....	4
Total Physical Response.....	4
Dictionary Strategies.....	4
Strategies with Pictures	4
Scrambled Words.....	4
What's in My Wallet / Purse?.....	5
Grab Bag	5
Disappearing Vocabulary List.....	5
Early Bird Words.....	5
Half a Picture.....	6
Pre-Teaching Vocabulary.....	6
Act It Out Before We Read It	7

B. **Work with Words:** manipulating and playing with words

Do I Know These Words?.....	7
Stand for Your Word.....	8
Mingle	8
Categories.....	9
2-in-1 Vocabulary Review.	9
Arithmetic Fun.....	10
What's My Number?.....	11
Words on My Wall	11

C. **Make the Words My Own:** deeper understanding and long-term retention

Associations	11
Create New Contexts	11
Vocabulary House	12
Categories	12
Finish the Sentence.....	12
Vocabulary Cards	12
Learning Goals Support Groups	13
Four Corners Vocabulary.....	14

Resources	15
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A. Meet the Words: initial exposure to words

Read a Lot!

This is the single best path to vocabulary building. Sustained Silent Reading, individualized reading plans, multi-level reading resource collections . . . other ideas?

Students Teach a Word

Put key words up on board. Read and repeat. Invite students to put their name by any word they know; they teach this word to the rest of the class.

Find the Word

A pronunciation and scanning exercise.

Demonstration: Give students a clue (e.g., a short definition or synonym, mime, or sketch) about a new word they're about to find in a reading. Students repeat the word, then quickly find it in the reading and put their finger on it.

Main activity: Pairs of students continue this with each other.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

Kinesthetic learning is a powerful thing! (See *Live Action English* in Resources list, as well as subsequent TPR books.)

Dictionary Strategies

Teach dictionary strategies; keep various levels of dictionaries on hand.

Remember that definitions are condensed, contrived, and often misleading. ESL learners' dictionaries are more useful than traditional dictionaries, but examples and translations are more useful than definitions. Among ESL learner dictionaries, *Collins CoBUILD English Language Dictionary* (1987) is especially notable because it provides such clear explanations. For example:

sparse: "Something that is sparse is small in number or amount and spread out over an area." (Beck, p. 123)

Visit [Dictionary.com/Word of the Day](http://Dictionary.com/Word_of_the_Day) or Factmonster.com/WordWise; two sites that students might want to use for ongoing exposure to new words.

Strategies with Pictures

Use pictures from magazines and other sources.

For example, students may cut out pictures illustrating words they don't know. With help from the teacher or classmates, they write the word on a note and clip it to the picture. You can use these in various ways, e.g.,

- a. Students mingle to teach their words to one another.
- b. Put several pictures up on a wall; practice the words; then take the notes off the pictures and rearrange the notes. The task: students clip the notes back onto the right pictures.

Scrambled Words

For sight-word recognition: Students (or the teacher) print a sentence and cut the words apart. The student's job is to put these scrambled words back together while looking at an intact copy of the sentence. Very simple and fun!



What's in My Wallet / Purse?

(Adapted from *Zero Prep*.) Students set several items (from their wallets, pockets, purses, etc.) on their desks. The possibilities for vocabulary learning are vast and lead to common, much-needed, high-interest words.

Grab Bag

The teacher and/or students bring common objects from home or the workplace. These can be named, described, grouped . . . again, the possibilities are endless.

Disappearing Vocabulary List

(Adapted from *Zero Prep*.) This is great for pronunciation and sight-sound correspondence, for beginners and up.

Procedure:

1. Write a list of words on the board.
2. Chant the list several times, first alone, to model pronunciation, then with students. Finally point to words silently while the class chants the list.
3. Erase one word, putting a mark where it was in the list. Students chant the list again, including the word that you erased.
4. Continue chanting the list over and over, erasing more words until the list is completely gone.
5. Students dictate the list as it gets written back up on the board.

Early Bird Words

(a.k.a. "Real English") On a regular basis, dedicate a few minutes (perhaps starting a little before the official start of class) to student-centered vocabulary sharing. This empowering warm-up activity is so popular that students start coming on time—even early! It helps students get acquainted and builds community

Procedure:

Here are two options to try:

- a. Invite one or more students to write on the board a new word they've learned recently.
The student teaches this word to the class. OR
- b. Invite students to write up a word they saw or heard but don't understand. They get help from you or—better yet—from classmates.



Half a Picture

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This activity is a way for students to say the words they know and learn new words. The whole class does it together, so if a student knows few or no words about the picture, that's okay.

Procedure:

Aim: Generating words to use in a later activity

Materials: an interesting picture

1. Hold up the picture with half of it hidden.
2. With the whole class, talk about the half of the picture you can see. Write some of these words on the board.
3. Point to the hidden half and let your curiosity show. "What's in this half?"
4. As the class calls out ideas about what might be there, write their ideas on the board. (Offer prompts if they need help.)
5. Reveal the whole picture.
6. Erase ideas from the board that turned out not to be in the picture (praising these as good guesses); talk about the guesses that were correct; and add new vocabulary that students didn't think of before.
7. Students copy these words into their notebooks or make vocabulary cards.

Preteaching Vocabulary

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Procedure:

Level: Intermediate–Advanced

Aim: Pre-reading

1. Choose one of these options to introduce this activity:
 - a. List on the board new words that will help your students with a lesson. OR
 - b. Students scan for unfamiliar words (a few students assigned to each paragraph); they write these words on the board.
2. Once the words are on the board, students write their names beside any word they can use in a sentence.
3. Briefly explain any words that nobody knows.
4. Students mingle, explaining the word they know to other students by using the word in a sentence. They teach the same word several times, to several different classmates.
5. Circulate, helping students make correct sentences and offering more sentences that use the words nobody knew.

Extensions:

1. In plenary, ask students to write sentences using the words on the board.
 - a. Students may write their sentences on paper. In larger classes, circulate to check papers, and



send more advanced students around to show their good sentences to less advanced students.
 b. Alternatively, have students put their sentences on the board and then read them aloud. Make corrections when needed.

2. Choose a few of the vocabulary words and ask students to make up a story using these words.

Act It Out Before We Read It

This kinesthetic preview activity raises interest, pre-teaches vocabulary, and makes the meaning clear. The listening (or reading) that follows becomes a very satisfying experience for students!

Procedure:

1. Bring volunteer students up to the front of the room before the class reads or listens to a story.
2. Coach each student, step by step, on where to stand, what to do, and what to say. As you direct them, students move and repeat your prompts to act out the basic meaning.
 (This is another great routine I learned from Dr. Natalie Hess.)

B. Work with Words: manipulating and playing with words

Do I Know These Words?

(Reference: *Finding Family*, a forthcoming book by Hess, Pollard, and Rick Kappra)

Students see their progress graphically, as they move their words toward the right side of the chart.

Procedure:

Materials: Have a list of words to show students. Be sure that some are words they already know.

1. Ask “Do you know these words?”
2. Individually, each student writes each word on one of the rows, under the column that shows how well s/he feels they know that word. They do this in pencil. A few words are in the chart below, as examples of where one student might place four words.

I don't know this word	I have seen this word before.	I understand this word.	I use this word easily.
1. <i>paradigm</i>			
2.			<i>fast</i>
3.	<i>summary</i>		
4.		<i>race</i>	
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			



- In groups, students talk to classmates about the words. They teach and learn from one another. As students learn more about a word, they may erase it and re-write it in a column farther to the right.

Extension:

Students can personalize their chart by putting in words of their own choice.

Stand for Your Word

This activity gives students a feeling that they own certain words. It's a short, fun activity that benefits students at all levels. One more reason to do this often: it gives students a chance to stand and sit again rapidly several times. This helps them wake up!

Procedure:

Aim: vocabulary review, reading review, grammar, spelling

Materials: A text (with questions) that students have read

- Students take out a piece of paper.
- Give each student a word to listen for. (The same word may be given to several students.)
- Be sure students know what their words mean. They may get help from other students or from you.
- Read the text out loud while students listen.
- As soon as a student hears his/her word, they stand up, then sit down quickly. Repeat this step a few times if it is challenging for them.
- Students trade words.
- Students hold up their new word and call it out. (Again they get help with meaning, if necessary.)
- Read the text aloud again while students stand up each time they hear their new word.
- Repeat steps 6-8 several times.
- Write the words on the board in the order that they appeared in the text.
- Students look at the text and read out the sentences where "their words" appeared.
- Students read the whole text and answer the questions.

Note: This activity is *not good* for general comprehension. However, it is excellent for:

- working the "big muscles"—getting oxygen to the brain;
- distinguishing words in a stream of speech;
- learning parts of speech: students can stand up for nouns until they are very clear on what a noun is, then go on to other parts of speech;
- sight-sound correspondences in literacy training; choose words with a sound that students are learning to spell;
- paying attention to unstressed (but important) words. Students who skip the verb 'be' in their writing or don't hear pronouns well will improve if they 'Stand For' these words!

Mingle

This routine gives students repeated practice as they teach something they know again and again. They don't get bored because each time they find a new partner, they're hearing something different. Two good variations:

- Mingle with Cards:* Students write or draw on a card something brief (a new word, a phrase or sentence using that word, a definition. They carry this card with them, telling the information to successive partners. (The cards help students stay on task.)
- Mingle, Swapping Cards:* The same activity, but this time students may trade cards with each successive partner as they mingle. This makes it more challenging!



Categories

Use this routine to review words that students have already studied. As they sort words into categories and explain their decisions, students make new associations with the words. This deepens their understanding and helps them remember the words.

Procedure:

1. Display a group of words that students are already familiar with.
2. Provide headings for categories. For example, if the list is:

elbow, father, run, smile, sister, eye, foot, cousin, fly

You would provide this chart:

People in the Family	Parts of the Body	Verbs

3. Students write each word in one of the columns.
4. In pairs or groups, they explain why they grouped them this way.

Extension 1: After students have done this a few times, let them choose category headings on their own. For example, what headings might students choose for the following list of words about the American Revolution?

democracy, George Washington, bayonets, muskets, Paul Revere, taxation, cannons, self-governance, freedom of religion, volunteer, brigades, Thomas Jefferson

Extension 2: Once students are good at playing “Categories,” go all the way with it! Provide (or have students come up with) a random list of words they’ve studied. Because there is no single best way to categorize the words, each student must decide, group, and label his/her own categories. This can be great fun; it leads to lots of discussions in pairs and small groups. And because of the discussions, students do not soon forget their words!

2-in-1 Vocabulary Review

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In this word association game, the challenge of creating meaningful contexts for seemingly unrelated words activates students’ imaginations. The new associations they create will help them remember vocabulary items.

Procedure:

Level: Intermediate–Advanced

Aim: Vocabulary review, fluency

1. With your students, construct on the board a list of words to be reviewed.
2. Students form pairs.
3. Circle two unrelated words on the board.



4. Pairs quickly form a sentence using both words. When both partners of a pair agree on a sentence, they raise their hands together.
5. Call on either student from this first pair to say their sentence to the whole class.
6. Other pairs listen carefully and decide whether they have used the two words correctly.
7. If the sentence is incorrect, another pair may try.
8. Give a point to the first pair with a correct sentence.
9. Mark two more words and repeat the contest until all words have been used.

Note: Because students don't know which partner the teacher will call on, both partners in the pair must be ready to answer. You can encourage pairs to collaborate by subtracting a point when the partner you call on is unable to produce a sentence. Partners quickly learn to talk and listen fast to get each other ready.

Variations:

- a. Have students do this alone, then compare their sentences with others in a noncompetitive lesson.
- b. Put students in groups of three or more.
- c. Increase the challenge level by circling three words instead of two. Students must use all three in a single sentence.
- d. In large classes, divide the class into two teams. Successful sentences from pairs will score a point for their team.

Arithmetic Fun

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This activity gives those students who have always loved arithmetic a sense of pleasure and power in their new language.

Procedure:

Aim: Reviewing numbers

1. Write any two-digit number on the board, for example: 14.
2. Write on the board: _____ + _____ = 14
3. Get students to help you do the arithmetic.
4. Write on the board: _____ + _____ = 14 and elicit a new combination to equal 14.
5. In small groups, students write down any combinations they can think of whose total is 14.
Examples: 10 + 4, 7 + 7, 6 + 8.
6. Stop when you notice that many students have finished their combinations.
7. Call on any student to read out any one number combination on his/her list.
8. Students who have this number combination cross it out.
9. Continue until all number combinations have been read.
10. The student left with a combination that no one else wrote is declared the winner.

Note: Be ready to use more complex numbers and other operations as soon as your students are ready for more of a challenge.



What's My Number?

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Students really enjoy the movement and the variety of this exercise.

Procedure:

Aim: Review of numbers and arithmetic vocabulary

Materials: tape, blank papers to make signs

1. Students form groups of seven.
2. Assign three random numbers to each of three students in each group. For example, one student gets a '7', one gets a '9', and another gets a '3'. Write these numbers on a piece of paper as you speak to the students. Students tape these signs to their chests.
3. Assign the roles of *plus sign* (+), *minus sign* (-), and *equals sign* (=) to three more students in each group. These signs are taped to their chests, also.
4. The remaining student in each group, the "answer person," has a blank sign.
5. Each group arranges itself in the shape of an arithmetic problem.
Example: $9 - 7 + 3 =$. (The "answer person" writes a 5 on his sign.)
6. Each group reads its problem to the whole class.
7. Groups rearrange themselves into new problems. (The answer person makes a new sign for each new answer.)
8. Continue the procedure as long as there is interest.

Words on My Wall

Students put words on notes and tape them up where they'll see them (and say them) often.

C. Make the Words My Own: deeper understanding and long-term retention

Associations

Review words by asking, for example, "What color goes with each new word? Why?"

Note: Associations are powerful at all three levels of vocabulary learning!

Other associations: What *person* . . . What *time of day* . . . What *place* . . . Others?

Create New Contexts

For example, students make up a story using their new words.



Vocabulary House

This is one example of an association game. Students draw the basic floor plan of a house that they have many memories from. They put each new word somewhere in their Vocabulary House and tell why they put that word there. They keep their *Vocabulary House* and use it often throughout the course.

Categories

Note: We met this in Section 2—here it is again in Section 3, just to remind us of what a flexible, independent activity this can become!

Students group a set of words they are learning into categories. Sometimes you might name the categories; more often, students create their own categories. When classmates compare the categories they created, there's plenty of discussion about these new words! You may be surprised at the variety of categories your students come up with. If a student gets in a rut and starts using the same categories over and over, have him/her see what other classmates are doing. Some categories our students have come up with are:

- things I like,
 - foods,
 - things I want (and don't want) to do,
 - things that remind me of home,
 - dangerous (or safe) words,
 - things for old people
- ... the list is limitless.

Finish the Sentence

Using personal knowledge and experiences, students complete a sentence that contains a word they're practicing. For example, *I feel frustrated when ... _____*

Vocabulary Cards

(Adapted from *Zero Prep* 5.16.)

Here is an activity that helps students remember and reuse the words they are learning, recycling them to form new associations as your course goes along. This works better for many students than writing lists in a notebook because:

- They can post cards on their refrigerator, their bathroom mirror, etc.
- They can throw away cards once they've mastered a word.
- They can use the cards as flashcards for review (they see the word but can't see the definition until they turn the card over).

Procedure:

Aim: Reviewing vocabulary

Materials: Index cards, a few for each student, to start with. Students will add more later.

1. Every time students want to remember a word they just learned, they make a vocabulary card. (3" x 5" index cards work well.) On the front, the student prints the new word, as large as possible. On the back, the student puts anything that will help him/her remember the meaning (pictures, translations, similar words or opposites, notes about pronunciation or parts of speech, etc.).



Every card *must* also have a short sentence in the target language using the new word correctly. A good learner's dictionary will have useful sentences to copy. To deepen their understanding, students also write original sentences using the new word.

(*See note below: Creating Possible Sentences.)

2. Students use these as flashcards, quizzing themselves independently (in class and at home) by looking at the front and trying to remember the word, then using it in a sentence. If they need help, they can look on the back.

Extensions:

1. In class, pairs play a card game in which they fan out their own collection of flashcards for their partner to see. The partner points to a card at random, and the holder uses the word in a sentence. This game can be given a competitive edge if small coins are won or lost when a student succeeds or fails to remember a word.
2. Students take out all their cards and arrange them into categories, then explain to a classmate why they sorted them in this way. (Typical categories might be colors, furniture, parts of the body, clothing, easy words/words I need to study more, etc.)
Note: One way to create good sentences—after initial teaching and practice with a new word, write it on the board.
 1. Each student writes a possible sentence for this word.
 2. Several students write their sentences on the board. (To preserve anonymity, you may collect all the unsigned sentences, then hand them out randomly to be written up on the board.)
 3. Go over these, clarifying how to use the new word correctly.
 4. Students correct the sentences they wrote.

Learning Goals Support Groups

This activity helps students take a more active role in learning. They set and revise goals, they make choices about strategies, and they expand their strategies as they hear about what other students are doing to learn more words.

Procedure:

1. *Class Discussion:* Students share how they learn (and how they remember) new words. Often, they come up with effective strategies that the teacher never thought of!
2. *Individual Goal-Setting:* Invite students to write down their own goals:
 - How many new words do I think I can learn each week?
 - What strategies will I use to learn and to remember new words?
 - How can I get an A on our weekly vocabulary quiz?
 - How many times can I use this new word in speaking or writing this week?

Students might list their goals and strategies, or they may use a chart that includes columns with headings like these:

*My goal / Why I want this / What I'm already doing / Other ideas I can try /
 My intention for the coming week*



3. *Support Group Sharing*: On a regular basis, dedicate class time to pair or small-group sharing about vocabulary goals. Students take out their goal-and-strategy paper. They may:
- share strategies for remembering and using new words,
 - brag about a time when they used a new word since the last class,
 - change their goals or strategies, re-writing their paper,
 - announce their intentions to their group (which will meet again!). Most of us are more likely to keep commitments we have shared with another person.

Four Corners Vocabulary

(Reference: *Making Content Comprehensible: The SIOP Model*)

This activity richly connects a new word to associations, making it much easier to remember! Individually, in pairs, or in groups, students make a chart for each new word, writing something appropriate in each of the four quadrants. This helps connect the new word and its meaning to several areas of the brain:

Word	Picture
Context Sentence	Definition

One way to play with these is for a team to show other students just one of the quadrants they made (the picture, the definition, or the context sentence); other students guess the word.

For example, students might make the *Four Corners* chart below for *volcano*.

Volcano	[sketch of volcano goes here]
The ____ sent lava and ash all over. It killed a lot of trees.	When melted rock pushes up a mountain, that's a ____.

Students fold their chart so another student (or team) sees only one square, for example, the context sentence: "The ____ sent lava and ash all over. It killed a lot of trees." The other students try to guess which new word this sentence needs: "Volcano!"



Resources

Oxford Picture Dictionaries

Remember, semantic sets can confuse students.

Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction. Beck, Isabel, et al. The Guilford Press. 2002.

This is the best resource I know for insights and techniques for teaching vocabulary in K-8; very useful to teachers of adults too.

Community Spirit Cristison, Mary Ann and Sharron Bassano. Alta Book Center.

This is a manual for creating a cooperative, student-centered classroom in which students feel empowered.

Live Action English, Romijn and Seely, 2002.

A TPR classic!

Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model, Echevarria, Vogt, and Short. Pearson, Allyn, and Bacon Publishers. 2004.

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The Cracked Water Jar

—Unknown

Every day, a servant walked down the steep hill to the river. He carried, on a pole across his shoulders, two large water jars. Each day, he carefully filled the two jars to the brim with fresh, cool water. Then he carried the water jars back up the long path to the master's house.

One of the jars had a crack that ran a third of the way down from its brim. Each day, a third of the water it carried leaked out before the servant reached the top of the hill.

One day, the cracked water jar could stand it no longer. Just as the servant finished filling it with water, the jar finally spoke. "There's something I need to tell you." The servant was surprised, but respectful: "Yes?"

"Every day you fill me with water, and every day I spill a third of it before you reach the master's house. I've felt awful about this for years. So what I need to tell you is: I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry."

"I had no idea you felt that way about it," said the servant.

"Well, I do, and I just couldn't keep it to myself any more. I'm really very sorry."

Thoughtfully, the servant replied, "Very well. You've told me how you feel. I have an idea: just for today, do not think about that as we walk up the hill. Instead, just enjoy the walk."

"All right," said the water jar. "I just needed for you to know how sorry I am."

"I understand," said the servant.

So they went up the hill to the house. When they arrived, the servant asked, "Did you enjoy the walk?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did! Very much!" answered the water jar. "I never realized before that the path is filled with beautiful wildflowers . . . they're marvelous!"

The servant paused and smiled. "Did you notice that the flowers bloom only on one side of the path? When I first started working here, I planted seeds along the path and took care to carry you always on that side. Now, every afternoon, I go along the path and cut the most beautiful flowers for the master's table. Everyone who comes to this house enjoys them."

The moral of the story: We are all cracked water jars. Even what we see as our flaws may bring goodness.

