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how to

Teach Vocabulary

如何教词汇

Scott Thornbury

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出版前言

随着国内和国际形势以及科学技术的发展，国际交流日益频繁，我国对外语人才的需求日益增加，英语的重要性也日益突出，从而推动了外语教学事业的迅猛发展。新一轮课程改革的开展和英语课程标准的颁布也对中小学英语教学提出了更高的要求，在这种情况下，外语师资培训和自身建设的重要性与日俱增。从“师资培训”这一概念的变化——由最初的 teacher training （教师培训）到后来的 teacher education （教师教育），再到今天的 teacher development（教师发展）——我们也可以看到教师不断充电、终身学习的必要性和重要性。

目前虽然国内其他出版社也先后引进了一些英语教学理论图书，但大多理论性太强，广大中小学英语教师理解和运用起来比较困难，因此，我们从培生教育集团引进了这套浅显易懂的英语教学法专著。我们首先奉献给大家的有《英语教学实践》（The Practice of English Language Teaching），《如何教语法》（How to Teach Grammar），《如何教词汇》（How to Teach Vocabulary），《如何教语音》（How to Teach Pronunciation）。

《如何教词汇》是著名英语教学法专家 Jeremy Harmer 主编的 How to 丛书之一，由著名英语语法教学专家 Scott Thornbury 编著，全书共分 9 章：词汇的内涵、词汇是如何学习的、课堂上词汇的来源、语篇、词典和语料库、如何导出词汇、如何运用词汇、教授词素和词串、如何测试词汇、如何培养优秀的词汇学习者等。本书不但吸收了词汇教学法、应用语言学、语用学等的最新发展和研究成果，而且还提供了丰富的示例，详细介绍并分析了词汇教学与诸如交际语言教学、任务型语言教学等各种教学法与词汇教学的结合方式，可谓英语词汇教学的百宝箱。因此，无论对有经验的老师，还是没有经验的老师，此书都有很大的参考价值。

本书既可作为英语教师和英语教师培训者的英语教学法普及读本，也可用作普通中、高等师范院校、教育学院、教师进修学校英语专业学生的教学法教程。

编者

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Introduction

Who is this book for?

How to Teach Vocabulary has been written for all teachers of English who wish to improve their knowledge and to develop their classroom skills in this important area.

What is this book about?

There has been a revival of interest in vocabulary teaching in recent years. This is partly due to the recent availability of computerised databases of words (or *corpora*), and partly due to the development of new approaches to language teaching which are much more 'word-centred', such as the 'lexical approach'. This interest is reflected in the many recent titles you will find in the *Further Reading* list on page 183. However, these developments have been slow to reach teachers in a form that is easily transferable to the classroom. This book aims to bridge that gap: to sketch in the theoretical background while at the same time suggesting ways in which the teaching of vocabulary can be integrated into lessons.

Given the challenge involved in processing, storing and producing words in a second language, the book attempts to answer the question: what can teachers do to help?

Before looking at specific procedures and techniques, we will need first to define what a word is, and how words relate to one another (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 looks at the way this knowledge is acquired, organised, stored and retrieved, and includes a brief discussion of the nature and role of memory. Crucial to the success of a teaching sequence – whether a lesson or a whole course – is the selection of items to focus on. There are a number of sources from which to select words, and Chapters 3 and 4 survey these sources – including coursebooks, dictionaries, corpora and literature.

Classroom techniques for presenting vocabulary items, and for practising them (or 'putting them to work') are dealt with in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively. In Chapter 7, the concept of the word is expanded to include both the way individual words are formed from smaller components, and the way words themselves combine to form larger 'chunks', often with idiomatic meaning. In Chapter 8, the testing of vocabulary is dealt with, while Chapter 9 looks at ways of helping learners to take responsibility for their own learning, including ways of coping with gaps in their vocabulary knowledge.

Practical classroom applications are signalled throughout by this icon  . Finally, the Task File consists of photocopiable task sheets, relevant to each chapter. They can be used for individual study and reflection, or for discussion and review in a training context. An answer key is provided.

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Introduction

'A word is a microcosm of human consciousness.' (Vygotsky)

All languages have words. Language emerges first as words, both historically, and in terms of the way each of us learned our first and any subsequent languages. The coining of new words never stops. Nor does the acquisition of words. Even in our first language we are continually learning new words, and learning new meanings for old words. Take, for example, this description of a wine, where familiar words are being used and adapted to express very specialised meanings:

> A deep rich red in colour. Lush and soft aroma with plums and blackberries, the oak is plentiful and adds vanilla to the mix, attractive black pepper undercurrents. The mouthfeel is plush and comfortable like an old pair of slippers, boysenberry and spicy plum fruit flavours with liquorice and well seasoned oak. The generous finish ends with fine grained tannins and a grippy earthy aftertaste.
>
> (from web page at www.ewinexchange.com.au)

If you are not familiar with wine-tasting terminology, you may have found this text heavy going, due to both the density and specialised nature of its vocabulary. For example, you may be familiar with *lush* and *plush* but uncertain as to what they mean, or how they differ in meaning, in this context. Some words may be entirely new to you – such as *grippy* and

mouthfeel. Learners of a second language experience a similar bewilderment even with much simpler texts. They may be confronted by words that are totally unfamiliar, or are being used in ways that for them are novel and possibly obscure. They may even be meeting concepts that are simply not represented by words in their first language.

Their problems are compounded when they need to produce language. Finding the right word to fit the intended meaning is frustrating when your store of words is limited. And when words get confused with each other, even within this limited store, the results can be disastrous, as in this example from a student's composition:

> I am writing to complain you about an unnecessary operation that I had at St Charles Hospital, last May 24. Two months ago, I went to visit Doctor Sánchez, who works at this Hospital, because I had adenoids that prevented me to breathe. He persuaded me to have a noise operation to get out the adenoids. I was worried with this idea, but finally I accepted his decision. Two weeks later I had been operated.
>
> The problem was when he removed the bandages of my noise. I gave a shout!!!! My noise had been changed by a small noise similar to the pig's noises ...

To sum up, learning the vocabulary of a second language presents the learner with the following challenges:

- making the correct connections, when understanding the second language, between the form and the meaning of words (e.g. *mouthfeel, grippy*), including discriminating the meanings of closely related words (e.g. *lush* and *plush*)
- when producing language, using the correct form of a word for the meaning intended (i.e. *nose* not *noise*)

To meet these challenges the learner needs to:

- acquire a critical mass of words for use in both understanding and producing language
- remember words over time, and be able to recall them readily
- develop strategies for coping with gaps in word knowledge, including coping with unknown words, or unfamiliar uses of known words

Identifying words

In order to address the above issues, it may pay to start at the beginning, and to attempt to define what exactly a word is. Here is a sentence that, at first glance, consists of twenty of them:

> I like looking for bits and pieces like old second-hand record players and doing them up to look like new.

Of course, there are not twenty *different* words in that sentence. At least two of those twenty words are repeated: *and* is repeated once, *like* three times: *I **like** looking for bits and pieces **like** ... look **like** new.* On the other hand, the first *like* is a verb, and the other two are prepositions – so is this really a case of the same word being repeated? And then there's *looking* and *look*: are these

two different words? Or two different **forms** of the same word? Then there's *second-hand*: two words joined to make one? Probably – the hyphen suggests we treat *second-hand* differently from, say, *I've got a second hand.* But what about *record player*? Two words but one concept, surely?

It gets worse. What about *bits and pieces*? Isn't this a self-contained unit? After all, we don't say *pieces and bits*. Or *things and pieces*. A case, perhaps, of three words forming one. (Like *bits and bobs.*) And *looking for*: my dictionary has an entry for *look*, another for *look for*, and yet another for *look after*. Three different meanings – three different words? And, finally, ***doing them up***: although *doing* and *up* are separated by another word, they seem to be so closely linked as to form a word-like unit (*do up*) with a single meaning: *renovate*. One word or two?

The decision as to what counts as a word might seem rather academic, but there are important implications in terms of teaching. Is it enough, for example, to teach *to look* and assume that learning *to look for* and *to look after* will follow automatically? Do you teach *look*, *looks*, *looking* together? Should you teach *record* and *player* as separate items before introducing *record player*? And how do you go about teaching *to do something up* when not only is the meaning of the whole more than the sum of its parts, but the parts themselves are moveable? You can *do a flat up* or *do up a flat*. Finally, how do you assess how many words a learner knows? If they know *bits* and they know *pieces*, can we assume they know *bits and pieces*? Does the learner who knows *bits and pieces* know 'more' than the learner who knows only *bits* and *pieces*?

Let's take a closer look at these different aspects of what constitutes a word. In so doing, we will attempt to cover the main ways in which words are described and categorised. Knowing how words are described and categorised can help us understand the decisions that syllabus planners, materials writers and teachers make when it comes to the teaching of vocabulary.

Word classes

We can see from our example sentence that words play different roles in a text. They fall into one of eight different **word classes**:

nouns	bits, pieces, record, player
pronouns	I, them
verbs	like, looking, doing, to look
adjectives	old, second-hand, new
adverb	up
prepositions	for, like
conjunction	and
determiner	–

Like, like many words in English, can belong to two or more word classes. The unrepresented class are the determiners – words like *a, the, some, this, last.*

In terms of the meanings associated with these word classes, we can make a crude division into two groups. On the one hand, there are words like *for, and, them, to* that mainly contribute to the grammatical structure of the

sentence. These are called **grammatical words** (or **function words**) and are generally prepositions, conjunctions, determiners and pronouns. On the other hand, there are the **content words**, those that carry a high information load. Content words are usually nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The sense of a text is more or less recoverable using these words alone:

like looking bits pieces old second-hand record players doing up look new

Compare this with:

I for and like and them to like

Typically, where space is at a premium, such as in text messages, newspaper headlines, and road signs, it is the content words alone that do the job: *RAIL STRIKE TALKS END*. Content words are an open set: that is, there is no limit to the number of content words that can be added to the language. Here are a few that have been added recently – *airbag, emoticon, carjacking, cybersex, quark.* Grammatical words, on the other hand, are a closed set. The last time a pronoun was added to the language was in the early sixteenth century. (It was *them.*)

Traditionally, grammatical words belonged to the domain of grammar teaching, while the teaching of vocabulary was more concerned with content words. However, the rigid division between grammar and vocabulary has become blurred recently. The interdependence of these two systems is a key tenet of what has been called the **lexical approach** (see page 112).

Word families

We've seen how words may share the same base or **root** (e.g. *look*) but take different endings: *looks, looking, looked.* This is a feature of the grammar of most languages: the use of add-ons (called **affixes**) to make a verb past (*looked*), for example, or a noun plural (*bits*). These different grammatical forms of a word are called **inflexions**. Adding affixes serves a grammatical purpose. It is also a fundamental principle of word formation generally – the adding of affixes to the roots of words (e.g. *play*) to fashion new words. A word that results from the addition of an affix to a root, and which has a different meaning from the root, is called a **derivative**:

play
play + er
re + play
play + ful

So, while *plays, played* and *playing* are inflexions of *play,* the words *player, replay* and *playful* are each derivatives of *play*. Inflexions and derivatives are both formed by the process of **affixation**. Note that *-er* and *-ful* are end-of-word affixes, or **suffixes**, while beginning-of-word affixes, like *re-*, *un-*, *pre-*, *de-*, etc. are called **prefixes**.

We can now talk about words as belonging to families. A **word family** comprises the base word plus its inflexions and its most common derivatives. To take another example, the base form *understand* includes the following members in its family:

understands
understanding
understood
understandable
misunderstand
misunderstood

Research suggests that the mind groups these different forms of the same word together. Therefore, rather than talk about the number of individual words a person knows, it makes more sense to talk about the number of word families.

Word formation

Affixation is one of the ways new words are formed from old. Another one is **compounding** – that is, the combining of two or more independent words, as in the case of *second-hand, word processor, paperback*, and so on. The fact that many compounds started life as two separate words is evident from their variant spellings. Thus: *dish washer, dish-washer, dishwasher*; and *wild flower, wild-flower, wildflower*. This is one reason why it is tempting to consider *record player* as one compounded word rather than two single words.

Another reason to consider *record player* a single word is that this kind of compound pattern – noun + verb + *-er* – is a very common, and highly productive, one in English: a *record player* is a machine that plays records. Likewise *dishwasher, hairdryer, bus driver, goalkeeper, typewriter*; they are all formed according to the same principle. New words that follow this pattern are constantly joining the language: *screensaver, trainspotter, particle accelerator, mail server*. Another common pattern is the noun + noun pattern, as in *matchbox, classroom, teapot, mousemat,* etc. Of course, the two patterns – noun + noun and noun + verb + *-er* – can re-combine to form even more complex compounds: *dumptruck-driver, candlestick-maker, windscreen-wiper*, and so on.

Two words can be **blended** to form one new one (called a **blend**): *breakfast + lunch = brunch*; *information + entertainment = infotainment*. Or a word can be co-opted from one part of speech and used as another, a process called **conversion**. Typically nouns are converted into verbs (or 'verbed') as in *The shell **impacted** against a brick wall*; *Let's **brunch** tomorrow*. But other parts of speech can be converted as well: *she **upped** and left* (preposition → verb); *a balloon flight is an absolute **must*** (verb → noun). Finally, new words can be coined by shortening or **clipping** longer words: *flu* (from *influenza*), *email* (from *electronic mail*) and *dorm* (from *dormitory*).

In the following text, [1] indicates words formed by affixation, [2] compounds, [3] conversion and [4] clipping:

> Weighed down by details? The 40MB Clik! PC Card Drive from Iomega, a lightweight[2], removeable[1] storage[1] drive for PC users, will soon sort that out. Designed with people on the go[3] in mind, the Clik! PC Card Drive removes the need for additional cables and cumbersome[1] storage back-up[2,3]. Each Clik! disc has the capacity to store 40 megas[4] of information quickly and conveniently. With packaging[1,3] akin to your

favourite pair of Cutler and Gross specs[4], this stream-lined[2] system is an essential lubricant[1] to life in the fast lane.

(from *Wallpaper* magazine, Time Life)

Multi-word units

Even when words are not joined to form compounds, we have seen that groups of more than one word, such as *bits and pieces*, *do up*, *look for*, can function as a meaningful unit with a fixed or semi-fixed form. Technically these are known as **multi-word units**, but they are often called simply **lexical chunks**. For example, in the following extract (in which two workers are discussing the Australian car industry – a Holden is an Australian car) the lexical chunks are in italics:

KEITH: *It's amazing how* the bleeding car industry's *swung round*. It's Holdens *for years* and now Fords have got it. *Well and truly*. [...] *Year after year* they're *laying* more *off* towards *the end of the year* so they knew this was coming – it wasn't *out of the blue*.

JO: I think that they shipped *a lot of* the accessory overseas too. Before they did *a lot of the bits and pieces* themselves.

(from Slade D, *The Texture of Casual Conversation*)

The chunks vary in terms of how fixed, and how idiomatic, they are. For example, *out of the blue* is both idiomatic (that is to say, its meaning is not easily recoverable from its individual components) and fixed – you can't say ***from** the blue* or *out of the **green***, for example. *Well and truly* and *bits and pieces* (as we have seen) are also fixed, but less idiomatic. *Year after year*, on the other hand, is only semi-fixed. It allows a limited amount of manipulation: we can say *month after month* and *day after day*. Note that both *a lot of* and *for years* are typical of the enormous number of chunks that are used to express vague quantities and qualities: *loads of*, *that sort of thing*, *more or less*, *now and again*.

It's amazing how ... belongs to a set of semi-fixed multi-word units that function as **sentence frames**: they provide a structure on which to 'hang' a sentence, and are especially useful in reducing planning time in rapid speech.

Especially common in informal language are compounds of verb + adverb (like *swung round*), or verb + preposition (*look after*). These are known as either **phrasal verbs** or **multi-part verbs**. Because they are often idiomatic (like *lay off*) and can sometimes be separated (*laying more workers off* and *laying off more workers*), they present a formidable challenge to learners. (In Chapter 7 you will find more on chunks and phrasal verbs.)

To handle the fact that there are multi-word items that behave like single words, the term **lexeme** was coined. A lexeme is a word or group of words that function as a single meaning unit. So, to return to the sentence that started this chapter:

I like looking for bits and pieces like old second-hand record players and doing them up to look like new.

we could count *looking for*, *bits and pieces*, *record players*, *doing ... up* and *to look* as single lexemes, along with *I*, *like*, *old*, *them*, etc.

Collocations

We have seen how words 'couple up' to form compounds, and how they 'hunt in packs' in the shape of multi-word units. There is a looser kind of association called **collocation**. Two words are collocates if they occur together with more than chance frequency, such that, when we see one, we can make a fairly safe bet that the other is in the neighbourhood. The availability of **corpus data** (i.e. databases of text – see page 68) now allows us to check the statistical probability of two words co-occurring. The most frequent collocate of *record*, for example, is *world*. Another is *set*. So we have no trouble filling in the blank when we hear someone say *She set a new world ...*

Collocation is not as frozen a relationship as that of compounds or multi-word units, and two collocates may not even occur next to each other – they may be separated by one or more other words. *Set*, for example, is the second most frequent collocate of *record* but it seldom occurs right next to it: *He set the junior record in 1990*. Notice that *set* and *record* can also collocate in quite a different sense: *Just to set the record straight ...* In fact *set the record straight* is such a strong collocation that it almost has the status of a chunk, and indeed it gets a separate entry (under *record*) in dictionaries, as do some other strong collocates with *record*, such as *for the record*, *off the record* and *on record*.

Collocation, then, is best seen as part of a continuum of strength of association: a continuum that moves from compound words (*second-hand, record player*), through multi-word units – or lexical chunks – (*bits and pieces*), including idioms (*out of the blue*) and phrasal verbs (*do up*), to collocations of more or less fixedness (*set the record straight, set a new world record*).

Here is a text with some of its more frequent collocations underlined, while the more fixed multi-word units are in italics:

> A record number of 54 teams will be competing in three sections as the Bryants Carpets Intermediate Snooker League *gets underway* this week. Once again all three sections *are likely to* be very closely contested. In Section A, defending champions Mariner Automatics, captained once again by the most successful skipper in the league, John Stevens, will be *the team to beat*.
>
> The biggest threat *is likely to* come from Grimsby Snooker Club A, and P and J Builders who will have Steve Singleton *at the helm* for the first time.
>
> (from the *Grimsby Evening Telegraph*)

It should be clear from this passage the extent to which word choice is heavily constrained by what comes before and after. This is perhaps the single most elusive aspect of the lexical system and the hardest, therefore, for learners to acquire. Even the slightest adjustments to the collocations – by substituting one of its components for a near synonym (underlined) – turns the text into non-standard English:

> A record lot of 54 teams will be competing in three sections as the Bryants Carpets Intermediate Snooker League reaches underway that week. One time again all three sections are possibly to be very nearly contested ...

By way of an example, in the learner's text in the Introduction to this chapter (page 2) there are a number of collocations that are non-standard:

to get out the adenoids (for *to remove ...*)
I was worried with this idea (for *The idea worried me*)
I gave a shout (for *I shouted*)

Taken individually, each of these 'mis-collocations' is perfectly intelligible and nowhere near as serious as the *nose–noise* confusion, but in combination they may have a negative effect on some readers.

Homonyms

We have seen how *like* and *like* can be two quite different words: *I **like** looking ... look **like** new*. Words that share the same form but have unrelated meanings are called **homonyms**. For historical reasons, English is rich in homonyms: *well*, *bat*, *shed*, *left*, *fair*, etc. Thus, while *fair* in the sense of beautiful or pleasing comes from an Old English word (*fæger*), its homonym *fair*, as in *Skipton Fair*, comes from Latin *feria* by way of French *foire*. While homonyms provide a headache for the learner, their ambiguity is a rich source of humour. Like the joke about the duck who went to a chemist's to buy lip-salve. 'Will you be paying by cash or credit card?' asked the pharmacist. 'Just put it on my bill,' replied the duck.

Another potential source of confusion are the many words in English that sound the same but are spelt differently: *horse* and *hoarse*, *meet* and *meat*, *tail* and *tale*, *discrete* and *discreet*, *aloud* and *allowed*. These are called **homophones** (literally 'same sound'). There are also words that are pronounced differently but spelt the same: *a **windy** day*, but *a long and **windy** road*; *a **live** concert*, but *where do you **live**?*; *a **lead** pipe*, but *a **lead** singer*. These are called **homographs** (literally 'same writing').

Polysemes

As if homonyms, homophones and homographs weren't enough, another potential source of confusion for learners – and a challenge for teachers – is the fact that very many words in English have different but overlapping meanings. Take *fair*, for example. Clearly these two senses of *fair* are homonyms:

She had long *fair* hair.
My pig won first prize at Skipton *Fair*.

But what about these?

This isn't *fair* on anyone, but it does happen.
We have a *fair* size garden and we may as well make use of it.
She was only a *fair* cook.
The sun's rays can be very harmful, beating on unprotected *fair* skin.
This *fair* city of ours ...
It will be *fair* and warm.

Although there appear to be six different senses of *fair* represented here, ranging from *reasonable* through *quite large*, *average*, *pale*, *beautiful* to *dry and pleasant*, there is an underlying sense that at least some if not all of these

meanings are related. Try substituting *pleasing*, for example, and you'll find that it more or less fits most of these contexts. Dictionary writers (lexicographers) classify words like *fair* as being polysemous – that is, of having multiple but related meanings, each of which is called a **polyseme**. *Hold* is another good example of a polysemous word:

I *held* the picture up to the light.
I was *held* overnight in a cell.
You need to *hold* a work permit.
Mrs Smith is *holding* a party next week.
Marxists *hold* that people are all naturally creative.
He was finding it a strain to *hold* his students' attention.
They'll probably *hold* the London train if we're late in.
The theatre itself can *hold* only a limited number of people.
Will you tell her the offer still *holds*.
These books *hold* the bed up.

(All examples of *fair* and *hold* are from the *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*.)

If the polysemous nature of English vocabulary provides a challenge to dictionary compilers, it is a complete headache for learners. At what point can you be said to know a word such as *fair* or *hold* – when you know its most basic meaning, or when you know the different shades of meaning represented by all its polysemes? This is an issue we will return to when we look at the teaching of word meaning.

Synonyms and antonyms

Synonyms are words that share a similar meaning. Thus: *old*, *ancient*, *antique*, *aged*, *elderly* are all synonyms in that they share the common meaning of *not young/new*. However, there the similarity ends. We are more likely to talk about *an old record player* and even *an antique one* than *an elderly record player* or *an aged one*. Synonyms are similar, but seldom the same. Even between words that seem interchangeable, such as *taxi* and *cab*, or *aubergine* and *egg-plant*, one will be preferred over the other in certain contexts and by particular speakers.

Notice we were forced to define *old* in terms of what it is not: *not young/new*. Words with opposite meanings – like *old* and *new* – are called **antonyms**. Again, like synonyms, the relation between such opposites is not always black and white (to use two antonyms) and the very notion of 'oppositeness' is troublesome. The opposite of *an **old** woman* is *a **young** woman*, but the opposite of *an **old** record player* is *a **new** one*, not *a **young** one*. *Your **old** boyfriend*, however, could be either the boyfriend who is not *your **young** boyfriend* or the one who is not *your **new** boyfriend*. Nevertheless, like synonyms, antonyms have a useful defining function and are therefore a convenient teaching resource.

Hyponyms

Hyponym is another *-nym* word that is useful when talking about the way word meanings are related. A hyponymous relationship is a *kind of* relationship, as in *A hammer is a kind of tool* or *A kiwi is a kind of bird (and a*