Vocabulary learning strategies

Rationale

The MFL GCSE 2016 should enable students to "*deepen their knowledge about how language works and enrich their vocabulary in order for them to increase their independent use and understanding of extended language in a wide range of contexts.*" [i]

Vocabulary knowledge is widely considered to be the single most important factor in the development of linguistic proficiency, and by extension in languages examination success. Receptive and productive skills are to a large extent determined by the learner's knowledge and recall of vocabulary.

Learning and retaining vocabulary is also known to be one of the most challenging aspects of language learning for most learners. It is not a simple matter of learning words. Students need to acquire the meaning, spelling and gender, to learn how to use the words correctly in sentences, to store them in long-term memory, to recognise and recall them in new, unfamiliar contexts, and to use them at will in their own speaking and writing. Furthermore, they need to do all this with an ever increasing number of words over a period of several years, and with few opportunities for exposure to the language outside of limited curriculum time. It is no small feat!

There are many studies that suggest that vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) improve the effectiveness of vocabulary learning, and that curriculum time might usefully be dedicated to the development and use of such strategies. Indeed, at KS4 students are at a critical stage in their learning, needing to retain and recall existing vocabulary as well as extend their word knowledge.

The **editable vocabulary spreadsheets** accompanying this guide contain the Minimum Core Vocabularies (MCV) from the French, German and Spanish Edexcel 2016 GCSE specifications for Foundation and Higher tiers and can be used for vocabulary practice in class or for homework, to help prepare your students for the new GCSE. Please note that the MCV lists are not exhaustive but are intended as a guide; students at both tiers will be required to understand and respond to familiar words (appropriate to the tier) that are not are not on the lists.

If you prefer to use another vocabulary list format, please find the Minimum Core Vocabulary lists here (page 73 onwards):
French
German
Spanish

Bearing in mind the cumulative nature of GCSE, both in terms of skills, and also grammar and vocabulary, promoting progression from KS2 and KS3, it is helpful for us to consider strategies that revisit and refresh previously-learnt vocabulary as well as those that help them to acquire new words. This document includes some suggested strategies.

Strategies

Students may find the following strategies helpful when **building vocabulary**:

1 Choose a consistent method for recording new vocabulary that makes it easy to retrieve and re-use. This might include one or more of the following suggestions:

i. note new words in a separate vocabulary booklet
ii. record new language at the back of an exercise book with separate topic pages
iii. highlight key, new vocabulary in an exercise book, using a text book in a different colour pen

2 Consider vocabulary as a treasure trove. Take care to record it accurately, and signpost it usefully so that you can return to it later and still understand it. This might include:

i. writing the English and the TL
ii. noting the gender of nouns
iii. noting characteristics of verbs (regular, irregular (with details of how))
iv. masculine / feminine forms of adjectives
v. writing an example of how the word can be used in a sentence

3 Vocabulary will most often be encountered within a specific theme or topic, but there are high-frequency words that transcend topics and could be noted separately. For example:

i. time expressions
ii. opinion phrases
iii. verbs and phrases that are followed by an infinitive
iv. prepositions
v. most common adjectives, in pairs of opposites
vi. conjunctions

Some topics at KS4 require students to **re-activate prior vocabulary**. In those situations, these strategies may be helpful:

1 With a set of vocabulary provided by the teacher at the start of a new topic, students rate their own vocabulary knowledge. For each word, they ask:

i. Do I know what it means when I see it?

ii. Can I pronounce it?

iii. Can I spell it correctly?

iv. Can I use it in a sentence?

For any words that rate lower than 3 students undertake one of the learning strategies for new vocabulary described below.

2 Students are given a set of previously-learnt vocabulary related to a KS3 topic (e.g. school) and asked to categorise it, either as an open-ended task, or with specific categories (e.g. subjects, opinions, buildings, rules).

3 When introduced to a new topic, students are first given one minute to generate a list of any vocabulary they know related to the topic. Students exchange lists, and use a second minute to add any words to their partner's list.

4 At the start of a new KS4 topic, the teacher shows a video clip (muted) which is relevant to the new context. Students write down any TL words they can in response to the clip.

5 Before embarking on a new topic, teachers set a 'flipped learning' style homework, whereby students revise a set of vocabulary items, using an online vocabulary learning tool. This enables the teacher to begin the teaching from the point of using the vocabulary, rather than presenting it again in class.

6 Present previously-learnt (but largely forgotten) language by asking students to generate the meaning of each key word themselves (either by drawing a representation or writing what they think it means). Then reveal the meanings and ask students to correct their drawings / written versions.

7 Students go back to a previous vocabulary list from KS3 and choose 15 words. They create two or three revision activities for a partner, using those words. They could use these ideas, or more of their own:

- anagrams
- missing letters
- odd one out
- secret code (using 'wingdings' font or similar)
- definitions

When **learning vocabulary**, students may find these strategies useful:

1 Look, say, cover, write, check

2 Write sentences using the key words you want to learn

3 Use colour coding (e.g. to categorise words to help you remember them)

4 Make a word game – write words in English and in the target language on paper, cut them up, and match pairs together

5 Use traffic light colours to show what you do know and what you don't know, e.g.:

Red light = I don't know what this verb means or how to spell it
Amber light = I know what this word means but I can't spell it or use it in a sentence
Green light = I know this word. I can spell it and use it in a sentence.

For the words in your 'red' list, do some independent learning. Combining seeing, listening and doing strategies makes memorising more effective. Try one or more of the strategies in this list.

6 Teach a friend or family member some words

7 Create pairs of rhyming words to learn

8 Strengthen the 'fixative' power of learning by using gesture, sound and picture to embed new language

9 Use music and rhythm in memorisation of key structures e.g. verb paradigms and pronouns

10 Put students frequently in the situation where they need to retrieve language from memory, but keep the link to meaning. E.g. Mini whiteboard Q&A, sentence-completion, translation –cued by pictures, gestures, English. Also works orally.

11 Use peer tasks to make over-learning varied and enjoyable, either Q&A style such as *speaking lines*, or *peer testing* style, where one has access to the answers.

12 Use mnemonics (e.g. keyword, word association, first letter, acronyms, acrostics, roman room)

13 Use online resources to engage in active learning
i. Use an app to record yourself saying the TL words and their English meaning – use this to test yourself.
ii. Make some online flashcards and then play the games and activities created with them

Elaboration is the key! Doing something active to re-work the language over and over is how to fix it in long-term memory.

Practice

Select your language and practise using the different vocabulary learning strategies with the below words. Which strategy is the most helpful for you?

French

English	French
active	actif/active
alike; the same	pareil/le
easy	facile; simple
expensive	cher/chère
exciting	passionnant
(un)fair	(in)juste
famous	célèbre
fantastic	fantastique
fashionable	à la mode
fast	rapide

German

English	German
all	alle
alone	allein
angry	böse
angry	zornig
annoying	ärgerlich
astonished	erstaunt
awful, terrible	schrecklich
bad	schlecht
beautiful	schön
big, tall	groß

Spanish

English	Spanish
active	activo/a
all	todo/a
alone/lonely	solo/a
angry	enfadado/a
awful	horrible
beautiful	precioso/a, hermoso/a
big	grande
boring	aburrido/a
brave	valiente
brief	breve

With thanks to Rachel Hawkes

[i] *Modern foreign languages GCSE subject content* (DfE, 2014)
www.gov.uk/government/publications
Reference: DFE-00348-2014