

FAQ

(Frequently Asked Questions)

About Vocabulary and Functional Language

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FAQ About Vocabulary

1. Can I teach vocabulary in a competency-based program?

Yes, learning vocabulary is essential to acquiring a language. In fact, vocabulary is included in the Related Content of both the Core and Enriched ESL programs. However, the way we approach vocabulary in the classroom might change. Students themselves can identify words they need to focus on. They also discover the most effective ways for them to acquire, remember and use new vocabulary.

2. How do students best learn vocabulary?

In the ESL classroom, the emphasis is on language used in real communication. Students learn through interactive activities that are meaningful to them. Consequently, students focus on the task at hand rather than on the language itself. For example, students learn and practise vocabulary and expressions while working with teammates during a project or exchanging feedback with a partner. In such interactive situations, new vocabulary is incorporated into communicative tasks and learned in context.

3. What can I do to help students learn vocabulary?

As an integral part of that learning context, you are a resource for your students. You speak English to them and help students understand what words mean and how to use them in a sentence. They also learn and practise vocabulary with you during informal interaction such as when you talk about a hobby with them or comment on a photograph or drawing they have added to the cover of their agenda.

In addition, you model strategies for learning vocabulary and help students determine which strategies are most effective for them in different situations. For example, if you notice that a student uses a dictionary to look up every new word in a text, you could suggest and model other strategies, like using key words or prior knowledge of the situation being described to understand the text.



4. Is a more direct approach to learning vocabulary sometimes appropriate?

A well-balanced approach includes both implicit and explicit learning. It is adapted to the specific needs and interests of the students. For example, if your students do an information gap activity in which they describe a picture to each other, they use vocabulary they already know and might learn new words through this exchange. When students read a text, they understand certain words and try to guess the meaning of other words by using clues in the text. This is implicit learning.

At other times, students might need more explicit help with vocabulary that is interfering with their ability to participate in an activity or communicate in a given situation. If your students are doing a project on the environment and continuously ask you for help with the same words to describe a text they are viewing, you could take time out from the activity to focus on the words that are causing them trouble. In fact, if you know that certain new vocabulary words will be seen frequently in a text, it can be worthwhile to introduce those words to the students.

5. What are some basic principles for learning vocabulary?

- Students have a deeper understanding of the meaning of a word if they see the same word in different contexts.
- Students need time to acquire new vocabulary: they may have to use a word numerous times before trying the word in new contexts.
- Students work toward building a large vocabulary of words they understand without hesitation.
- Students use the context to learn most words that they do not encounter frequently, e.g. octopus, sky diving.
- Students link new words with the ones they already know and group words together, e.g. to talk, to speak, to whisper, to shout, to yell.
- Students learn and personalize their own strategies to acquire vocabulary. For example, an artistic student might have a set of visual techniques to remember a word. A music fan could use the lyrics of a song to recall what certain words mean or the way they sound.
- Students remember words they find meaningful and useful in their learning.



6. What can students do to discover the meaning of new words?

- Use material resources: texts, posters, word lists, appropriate dictionaries for their levels, computer software, the Internet, vocabulary journals, a thesaurus, etc.
- Exploit human resources: asking peers, the teachers, friends, etc.
- Guess from their knowledge of language conventions such as word order, agreement, spelling, etc.
- Guess the meaning from context.
- Draw on their knowledge of French (see *Cognates* #7).

7. What are cognates?

Cognates are words that are spelled (although not pronounced) identically or similarly in French and English, e.g. absent, accident, adolescent, production, satisfaction, table, etc. French-English cognates allow us to draw on students' knowledge of French without using French to communicate in the classroom.

However, there are also "false cognates" (in French, "faux amis") that cause students trouble, e.g. library/librairie, attend/attendre, raisin/raisin. How and when you draw students' attention to different "false cognates" depends on the students' readiness. A student learning the names of fruit will notice that a grape and a raisin are different. However, that same student may not yet be ready to remember that gentle and "gentil" are not cognates.

8. How can students remember a word once they know what it means?

You can help students identify the most effective ways for them to remember words. Some of the possibilities include...

- grouping words that have some type of relationship, e.g. with graphic organizers;
- explaining the meaning of words in their own terms;
- practising words and fixed expressions by using them in a variety of contexts;
- using pictures and/or imagery;
- associating new words to physical actions;
- repeating vocabulary verbally and in writing;
- building study aids, e.g. taking notes;
- referring to special vocabulary sections of materials;
- taping words onto objects;
- listening to recordings of words (books on tape, songs, radio broadcasts, classroom recordings, etc.);
- creating vocabulary notebooks;
- reflecting on what vocabulary they learn and how they learn it.



9. Why is it important to use authentic materials to learn vocabulary?

Authentic refers to materials that reflect natural speech or writing as used by native speakers. (Secondary Cycle One ESL and EESL programs, MEQ 2003) Using authentic materials in the classroom puts students in contact with real English as it is used outside of the classroom.

Exposure to authentic English offers numerous advantages when learning vocabulary. Students...

- see how words behave in actual language use;
- learn words in context as part of sentences and discourse;
- learn English as it is used in particular situations for effective and appropriate communication;
- have contact with cultural elements proper to different English-speaking communities: English as it is encountered through authentic materials reflects the cultural identity of a given community;
- become aware of the differences between spoken and written English.

10. How will reading help students with vocabulary?

Usually, the more someone reads, the better his/her vocabulary gets. Students need to encounter new vocabulary in rich contexts that provide clues to meaning. As well, students need to see a word many times to reinforce their understanding of the word and eventually use it.

Extensive reading and exposure to different texts corresponds to those needs. Intermediate students benefit from reading numerous authentic texts on the same topic. More advanced students are able to read a wide variety of authentic texts and deepen their understanding of words encountered in different contexts. For students at any level, the more prior knowledge they have about a subject, the easier it will be for them to predict what is to be read or to infer meanings of words.



11. What are some activities I can do to incorporate vocabulary into meaningful situations in the classroom?

Different activities can be used to raise students' awareness of vocabulary:

- semantic mapping: students are asked to draw a diagram of the relationships between particular words found in the text;
- vocabulary networking: diagrams are made based on information from a text;
- isolating word families that occur in a particular text (e.g. act, action, active, actively, activate, actor);
- word of the day and word of the week activities;
- word association lists to learn words encountered in texts;
- words selected by the class as important to remember;
- reciprocal teaching where students read a text and highlight words that are unknown, work with each other to understand the words and refer to other resources when they cannot predict or make intelligent guesses about meaning;
- using realia such as pictures and concrete objects to reinforce meaning;
- using synonyms and antonyms to explain meaning;
- computer programs that provide sounds as well as illustrations for students to practise their spoken and written vocabulary;
- vocabulary games and language games that recycle vocabulary, e.g. Hangman, Twenty Questions, Just a Minute, Mime games, Password, Draw Me a Picture, Taboo, Scrabble, Word Bingo, Concentration, Password, Jeopardy, Boggle, Catch Phrase, Scattegories.

12. What material resources can I use?

Teacher guidance is necessary in order to help students create and/or use these resources:

- dictionaries: even if students are able to guess a word's meaning from context, they may need to confirm their guess;
- thesaurus: synonyms can sometimes be easier to understand than dictionary definitions;
- vocabulary notebooks or personal dictionaries: according to how the students would like to organize the information, words can be grouped by meaning, by word class, with synonyms and antonyms, using diagrams, etc.;
- visual aids and graphic organizers such as posters, word maps, tree diagrams, word forks, etc. (see *Annex 1* of this document);
- computer software, Web sites, e-files;
- texts.



FAQ About Functional Language

13. What is functional language?

Functional language includes fixed expressions or frameworks for communicating that are used to achieve a specific purpose e.g., requesting help (Could you help me with this? How do you say...?), asking for advice (Do you think...? Would it be a good idea to...?), offering assistance (Let me help you. Can I do something to help?), using the response process (I learned that... I find... very interesting), using the writing process (Could you give me feedback on my text? I'm not sure I understand what you want to say here.), using the production process (How can we add this idea? I could prepare that part.).

14. How do students use functional language?

Students use functional language according to their needs to communicate. Functional language allows students to interact in authentic ways both in and out of the classroom. Students find it extremely helpful to be able to use certain expressions naturally. With your support, students focus on and practise what they determine to be the most useful expressions as they increase their fluency.

15. What are the advantages of functional language?

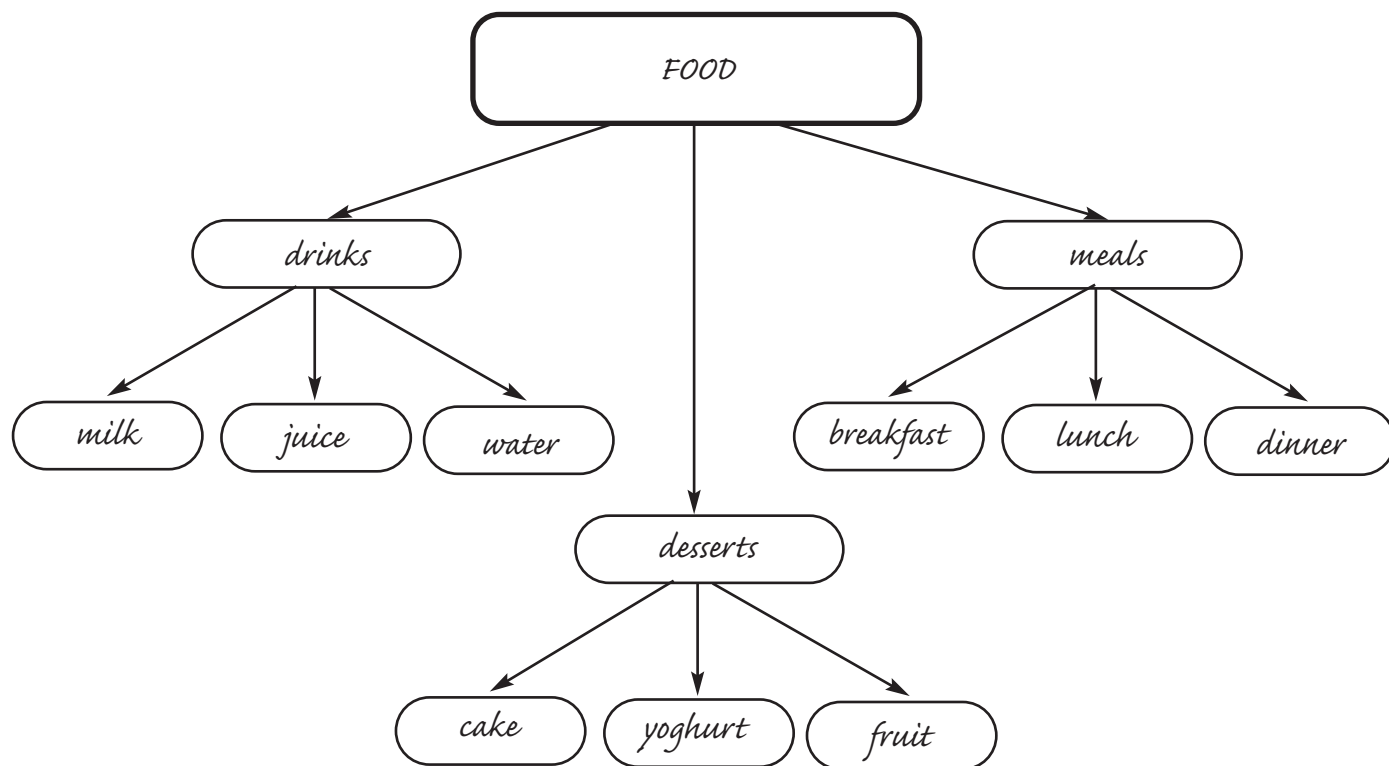
Functional language...

- can be remembered and reused;
- is "ready-to-go" for particular situations that are frequent and predictable;
- provides an efficient way to interact autonomously;
- allows students to use expressions that they cannot yet construct themselves;
- gives students time to think about what they want to say next;
- eases frustration and promotes motivation and fluency;
- can be learned for specific purposes, such as requesting help, as well as broken down into individual words, thus becoming a source of additional vocabulary;
- adapts to different contexts;
- provides students with an efficient means of interacting with others about topics they choose themselves, therefore making their communication authentic.

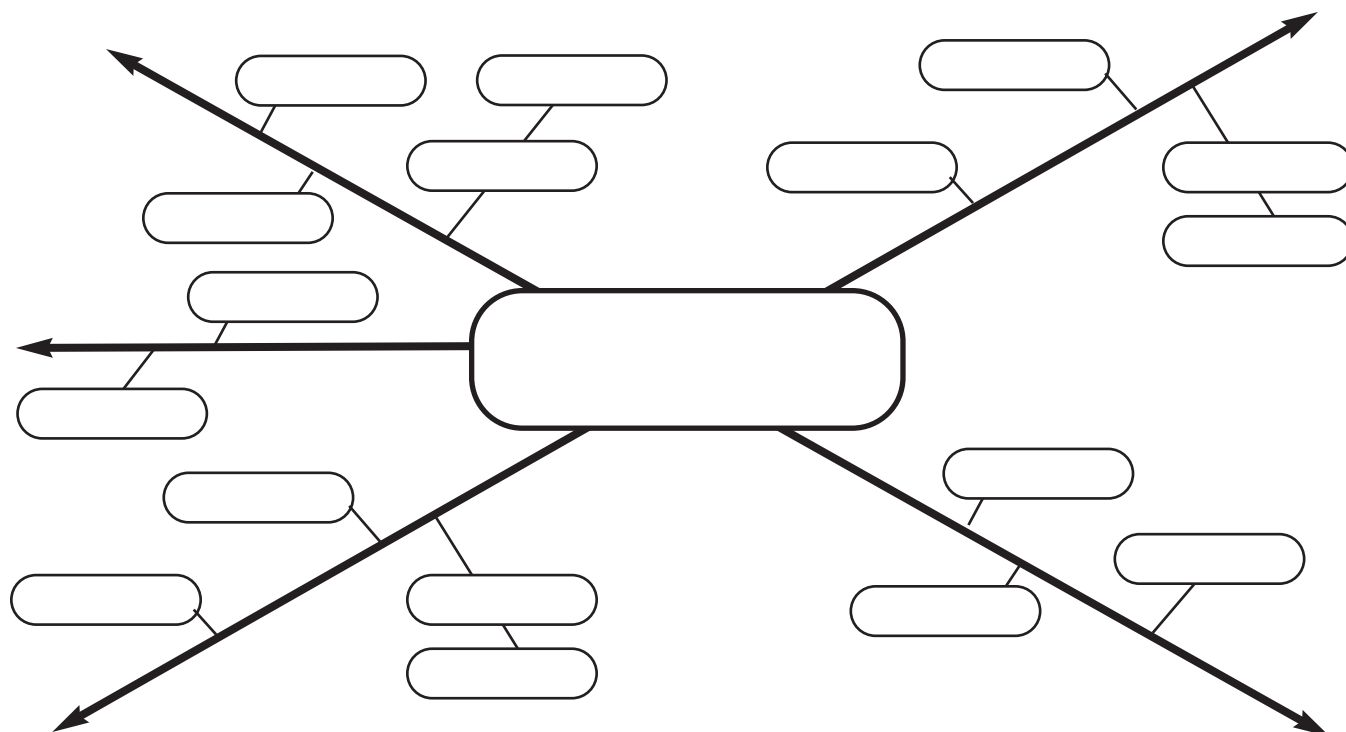


Graphic Organizers

Model 1 • Tree Diagram



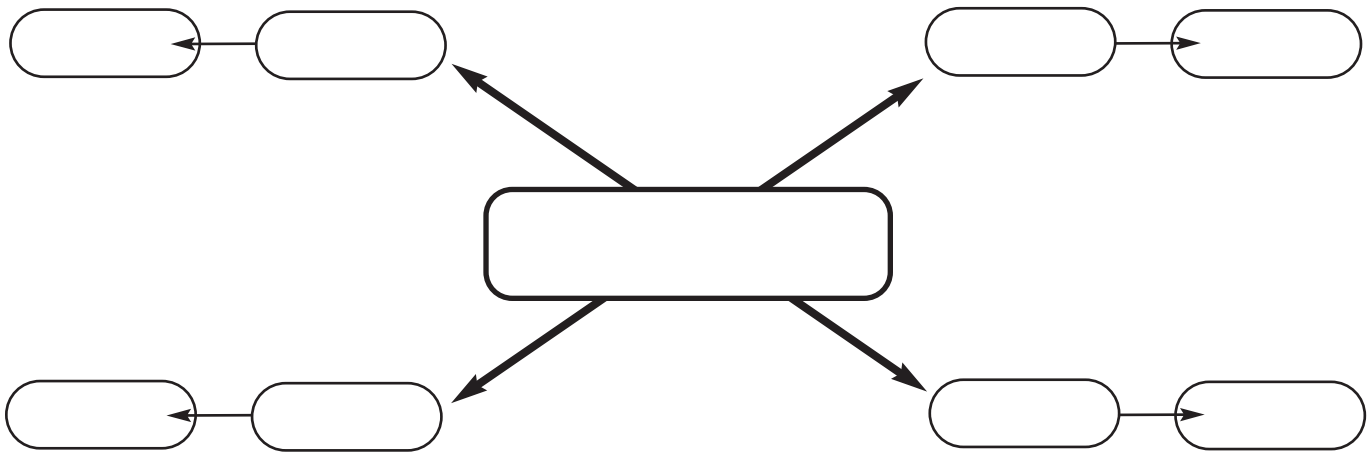
Model 2 • Word Map





Graphic Organizers (continued)

Model 3 • Bubble Network



Model 4 • Word Forks

