

7. The Business Vocabox: Activities for developing and activating vocabulary in the business English classroom

Johanna Stirling

Abstract

How much vocabulary did your business students learn yesterday? How many words and phrases can they remember that you taught them last week? Last month? We may teach lexis very clearly, comprehensively and competently in the business English classroom, but how can we ensure that what goes into students' notebooks gets into their long-term memories? This article sets out some very practical ways to do this. It does not focus on how we teach the lexis but on how we help students to actually learn it. All the activities are very low-tech, suitable for different levels and require a minimum of preparation by the teacher. They have all been tried and tested and they work! Students do manage to incorporate the lexis taught into their repertoire for productive use and they enjoy it. In this report I deal specifically with Business English courses, but the techniques and most of the activities are equally applicable to other ESP and indeed general English classes.

Rationale

The following situation is probably familiar to most teachers:

TA business English class is studying a newspaper article and in the course of the activities key vocabulary is necessarily highlighted and clarified. The vocabulary may be noted in books, perhaps with translations, transcriptions etc. The question is, what happens to it after that? The teacher may design further activities to activate it, but then what? Will it be remembered beyond the end of the lesson? Of course not! All of it needs to be activated, but even so students need further processing opportunities.

This project is a description of ways in which we have tried to give lexis the centrality in the classroom that it has in communication. Our concern here is not with the initial presentation of lexis but ways in which, after initial exposure, it can be activated and become part of the students' repertoire, readily available for use in different contexts.

The original project concerned general English classes and all the activities described here could also be used with such classes as well as with students of any other kind of specialised English. Certain modifications have been included in this report to show how the Vocabox is ideally suited to Business and ESP classes.

The equipment

In the increasingly hi-tech world of business, the Vocabox is a very low-tech piece of apparatus, consisting of a box (e.g. the top of a photocopy paper box or a biscuit tin) and pieces of card on which the vocabulary is written. The teacher selects lexical items that have been fully clarified and checked in class, writes them on cards and places the cards in the box. The Vocabox is kept in a central place in the classroom in order that the teacher or the students can pick out a card at any time (outside as well as within lesson time).

Recording the lexical item

While some teachers prefer to assign this task to a nominated student, it is essential that the items are recorded clearly and accurately; for this reason we have found it preferable for the teacher to write the new words on the cards. This should be done after clarification and checking of meaning.

What to write on the card

Write the lexical item. This may be a single word or it may be a chunk of language. Some teachers prefer to mark the stress, part of speech and even perhaps the phonemic transcription on the card. Others find the cards more versatile if only the lexical item itself appears on the card. This allows for activities such as grouping words according to their parts of speech or stress patterns.

Colour coding

There are numerous possible ways in which different coloured cards can be used in the box to categorise the contents. For example:

- Different colours can be used for different contexts (e.g. green = meetings, blue = telephoning).
- A different colour card can be used each week.
- A new colour can be used whenever a new student joins the class.
- Where different teachers share a class, they may wish to use different colours.

In very simple terms this is how the Vocabox works, but there are a great many practice activities and the rest of this report describes them and how our students responded to them.

VOCABOX ACTIVITIES

A. Elicitation Activities

These activities are very useful not only for revising vocabulary but also for fostering communication within the classroom. When doing these activities the students who are eliciting have to produce some precise, clear language (several of our students have found the process of trying to find the appropriate language of elicitation and asking for clarification a profitable end in itself). Below is a selection of elicitation activities for different situations.

Teacher elicitation

This is probably the simplest technique. The teacher may randomly select the cards or choose certain items which he or she then elicits from the class. Students can also be encouraged to produce derivatives of the elicited word, put the word in context, comment on the pronunciation etc.

Hot Seat

One student sits at the front of the class facing the others and with his or her back to the board. The teacher, or another student, writes a word from the box on the board. The student in the "hot seat" must not look at the board but the others have to elicit the word from him or her. Each student stays in the hot seat for one or two words then nominates another student to take over.

Before the teacher does this with a group it is useful to have done the activity a few times with the teacher eliciting. It also helps to provide and practise appropriate phrases such as:

This word/phrase means.....

This is the opposite of.....

This is an adjective/noun/verb.

You can find this in.....

In a business class more formal language of clarification could be practised:

You may remember the other day we were discussing....

What exactly do you mean by.....?

Sorry, I didn't catch that.....

OK, so let's summarise. It's a noun,.....

Hot seat race

To make the above game more competitive and to build teamwork skills, this can also be done with two (or more) groups. Each group has its own hot seat, facing away from the whiteboard. The first group to successfully elicit the word gets one point and then a different student in each group takes the hot seat. A noisy but motivating game. Watch out for cheating!

A variation on this uses the same seating pattern but the students in the hot seat go to the teacher who shows them both the same card. These students then rush back to their groups and try to elicit the words from them. The first group to give the word gets the point.

One-word clues

This is an interesting variation on the above. Arrange the students in the same way, but just one student who is eliciting can give a one-word clue. Then the next student can give another one-word clue. So all the students have a chance to try to elicit with one word.

Pair elicitation

Give each of the students a small pile of cards face down. Working in pairs, students take it in turns to try to elicit their words from each other. This is a very useful activity when the Vocabox is quite full. It is also a handy filler if you have time at the end of a lesson. As the students are in pairs they are all constantly involved in either trying to describe clearly or concentrating on understanding. It fosters good co-operation skills among students. I have often found that students enjoy doing this activity so much that they are reluctant to stop at the end of the lesson! Also I have often come into class to find students working together like this with the Vocabox unprompted by the teacher.

Chain elicitation

This activity is similar to pair elicitation, in that one student is eliciting a word/phrase from another but this time the cards pass round the class from one student to the next and back to the teacher, who joins the chain and feeds in cards at various points to keep the activity going.

Pictionary

Run this in the same way as the Hot Seat Race, but students can only elicit by drawing – no words allowed. Warning: this can become rowdy!

A variation on this is that students can either draw or mime their word but they can't say anything except "yes" or "no". Another variation involves just one student eliciting the word in this way from the rest of the class

Hangman

The only way this activity differs from the conventional game is that items are restricted to those in the Vocabox.

Vocabulary tests

Weekly vocabulary tests can be given very easily without the teacher having to spend a lot of time typing out tasks. The teacher merely picks out the words he or she wants to test and gives oral clues, but the students write the answer, rather than saying it. As the course progresses and the Vocabox gets rather full I divide the words equally between the students and tell them to choose 2/3 (depending on the size of the class) words each that they would like to see in the test. I have also experimented with having each student describing their words to the rest of the class, but as it is a test, the teacher often needs to help if the description is unclear or incorrect.

B. Contextualisation Activities

These activities need to take place regularly in order that students can learn to **produce** the lexical items correctly in an appropriate context. Students may have learnt that a word is a noun, but are they actually using it as one? Are they collocating it appropriately? And are they putting the lexical item into a sentence that native speakers might really say? Are they using it in the right register?

Contextualisation in a sentence

Again the procedure has many variations, but an easy "filler" is to ask each student to select an item from the box. Allow them 2-3 minutes to produce a sentence using the word *appropriately* (a few examples from the teacher are often necessary). Pass around 2 or 3 overhead transparencies and get the students to write their sentences on these so that they can be "shared", commented on and corrected by the whole group.

Gapped sentences

An alternative is for students to write gapped sentences with the chosen words or phrases missing. (Again you need to do an example on the board first) They leave the paper on their desk and move around the class reading other students' sentences and trying to note down the missing words.

Story Building

Each student has a word from the box and so does the teacher. The teacher starts a story which includes his or her word. A student is chosen who must continue the same story but must also incorporate his or her word. This student then chooses another and so on until all the students have added to the story. The words that the students are given could be chosen by the teacher, could be picked out randomly, or the students could each be given several words and they choose the one that most easily fits into the story. This could also be done in groups.

Dialogue Building

This is a variation of the story building activities described above, but is more useful practice for conversational phrases ('chunks' of social English such as telephone language) and again allows for oral practice. The students who have written the dialogue can learn it, act it out and the others listen to identify the lexical items they have used.

Use it first

Each student is given a word or phrase from the box at the beginning of the lesson. They then have to try to use their word or phrase in an appropriate way in the course of the lesson. This activity works particularly well with everyday phrases/ idioms (e.g. "Sorry to interrupt but..." or "We're skirting around the problem").

Use It For Real

This is similar to the activity above, but the students choose two or three items that they think they could use (but don't usually) in the next few days (before the next lesson). They are set the challenge of using those words, getting them into conversation as naturally as possible. In the next lesson they have to report back on how they used them, in what context, what the response was etc. This task is often carried out with great enthusiasm and students very much enjoy putting the vocabulary they have learned in class into real life use. Of course the students need to be in an English-speaking environment between lessons for this to work.

C. Vocabulary Extension

Antonyms

This activity is useful for developing the learners' awareness of system in lexis (in this case affixation). The teacher can select five words for each group and ask them to find the opposite using a prefix if possible. Alternatively the teacher can write a selection of the words on the board and elicit the antonyms orally.

Synonyms

The same procedure can be used to elicit synonyms. The teacher needs to highlight the fact that "true" synonyms are relatively rare and the answers will often be "near" synonyms. The students could make crosswords, word snakes or other puzzles for each other using these synonyms.

Word Families

Groups of students are given several single words (as opposed to phrases) and they arrange them in columns according to the parts of speech. Then they try to make other parts of speech from the same root.

D. Grouping

Filing

Pairs of students can be given a small pile of words to "file". They could categorise them according to:

- number of syllables
 - word stress patterns
 - parts of speech
- } *Assuming that these are not already marked on the slips.*

- topic
- formal and informal words
- which text they came from
- negative and positive words
- how sure they are about the meaning
- etc., etc., etc....

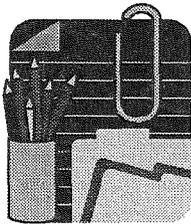
Chaotic Filing

Or students could be asked to group them in any way they like and other students have to work out what the criteria were.

Spidergram

After work on a specific area, e.g. employment, students are given all the lexical items in the box from those lessons and they have to try to arrange them in a spidergram. This means they have to understand all the words and discuss how they are connected. This works well with a small class of 4/5 students.

E. Labelling



This can most easily be done with nouns and adjectives. Groups of students are given a small pile of selected words, which they have to affix around the room with Blotak. At lower levels this can of course involve concrete nouns such as light, hole-punch, file. But could also, for all levels, be more abstract, e.g. “serious” (on the noticeboard), “late” (near the door), “Oh, I see what you mean” (on a grammar reference book). In the latter version, students then have to justify their choices.

F. Other Activities

Phonemic transcriptions

Learners can be given a list of words from the box in phonemic script and they have to write the word with correct spelling, thus reinforcing knowledge of the sound and spelling of the word as well as providing practice of using the phonemic script. At higher levels this is particularly effective if you use phrases with interesting aspects of connected speech e.g. “So do I” or “the shortest day”.

Crosswords

Students use items from the Vocabox to make a simple crossword, word snake or similar puzzle and write clues. Then they pass the puzzle on to different groups to solve.

I would like to thank all my colleagues at the Bell School in Norwich for their support and co-operation, especially Liz McMahon with whom I worked on the original project. Many thanks to the following for their valuable contributions: Tanya Ingram, John McMahon, Sara Sladdon, Caroline Preston and Joan Reid. And thanks too to all the students who have been such willing and co-operative guinea pigs.

Biodata

Johanna Stirling has been teaching general English as well as Business English and ESP at the Bell Language School in Norwich for over ten years. She is also a teacher trainer and has worked in Australia and Paris. She presented a paper on The Vocabox at IATEFL Manchester in 1998.