# Activities to Improve VOCABULARY

One thing that slows all of us down (especially when using a second language) - whether we are trying to **understand** what we read or hear, or when we are trying to **express** ourselves in speaking or writing - is not having sufficient vocabulary.

Years ago we used to be given lists of vocabulary to memorise ... it doesn’t get much more ***boring*** than that, and an impossible task for the less motivated student!

So here are some games and activities that help children / students to practise and learn, hopefully without really thinking feeling too much pain.

## 1. Create a link between the spoken word and the meaning

As teachers, we frequently rush into showing students the written word, start asking them to spell it, and define it.

All of our best words which we learnt in our first language were cemented in our brains by hearing them and associating them with something we saw, heard or felt.

***So, especially for the children for whom reading and writing is stressful and difficult, start by learning the actual word out loud.***

And, rather than forcing them into endless translating in their heads every time words are spoken, link the word with

* a picture
* an object or person
* an action
* a sensation involving their five senses
* an explanation involving English words that they are already familiar with.

To do this you could:

1. Use flash cards with pictures. (They are called 'flash' cards because you are supposed to hold them up and 'flash' them to the students who give an instant response.)
2. Just like with learning phonics in year 1 and 2, practise specific actions with each word. Make a game of it - teacher or student does the actions and students in teams take turns to give the response (gaining points).
3. Have a selection of pictures on the board / smart board, and when you say a word students have to select the right one.
4. Circle game. For example: Students are seated in a circle. Each one holds (at knee-level so others can see it) a picture flash card. Establish a pause-time word - it could could be meaningless like "Hickory Dickory" or it could be something with more meaning like "My word and your word". The nominated first student then says the pause word, followed by the word for their picture, followed by the word for another student's picture somewhere in the circle. For example "Hickory Dickory elephant snake." It is then the turn of the student holding the other picture that was mentioned to repeat the process.
5. A Circle Game could also be played using actions. Each child is designated a particular word/action. This time each child performs a rhythmic activity such as patting their knees then clapping their hands, then their action and word, followed by someone else's action and spoken word. They may not know who the second action belongs to, but they should be aware of all of the actions and words from previous class practice.

## 2. Develop some RHYTHM for saying the words

This is especially important for

* Children whose L1 has a very different stress / rhythm / intonation pattern from English. *(Including Malaysian children!)*
* Children who are unmotivated. This can be so much fun for them.

For short words you could easily create a simple ‘jazz chant’ for groups of words. For example *(using the Carolyn Graham method)* choose a word with 1 syllable, a word with 2 syllables, and a word with 3 syllables. Then create a chant that follows this pattern:

        **2,            3,            1,            \*

          2,            3,            1,            \*

          2,            3,            2,            3

          2,            3,            1,            \*

The \* is a clap** to give an extra beat at the end of some lines. It should be spoken rhythmically, with movement, and maybe finger clicks as well.

Of course, you won't always be using 3 or so words that fit this pattern. So it is important that you

* are aware of the syllables in the word
* are aware of which syllable in the word is stressed (if there are more than one)
* manage to say the word sequence / chant rhythmically.

And adding some **movement** (hips, feet ...) and **percussion** (clapping, clicking - or actually use objects such as desk-tops, chop-sticks, cutlery or real musical instruments) greatly adds to the fun.
Of course, if they are words you have learnt with actions (see above), build that in too.

## 3. *Now* look at the WRITTEN words

The children could have opportunities to see the words written in more than one medium. For example:

* On 'flash' cards
* On the board
* Embedded into a story or other text in their text book
* Written in their own handwriting in their exercise book, on the board, elsewhere ...

Make sure that the words are presented in **lower case** (NOT CAPITALS). Sometimes teachers like to use capitals to add emphasis, or make the letters bigger, or something. However, observing the shape of the word is one of the first "Word Attack Skills". Encourage the children to use these skills when they first see a new written word:

* Notice the shape of the word, notice letters that are **taller** than the others, letters that **hang** below the line, **double** (or repeated) letters.
* Try 'sounding it out' using phonics - this may or may not be possible, it may be a 'tricky word'!
* Look for little words they already know which are part of the word.
* Maybe remember other words which they already know which are similar in some way - same first letter, same final letter, same vowel etc.
* Look at the word in context - in a sentence, is it placed as a noun / verb / adjective etc.
* Look at the context where have they seen the word in terms of subject matter.

They could start by responding to the Flash Cards when held up by the teacher, and then play a team game seeing which team can select the correct word from several displayed etc.

## 4. Play a MATCHING game.

Give out **sets of cards** with the **pictures**, and separate cards with the **words.**

* Children could work in pairs, and try to match them up.
* It could be a race, see who can complete it first.
* With bigger picture and word cards the matching game could be played on the board.
* The words could be on the board, and children bring a picture to match each – or vice versa.

***They should say the word aloud every time they place a word or picture card.***

Children can also match words and pictures on a **worksheet.**

## 5. Play PELMANISM (or 'Concentration' or 'Memory')

This age-old game, called ‘Pelmanism’ (sometimes called ‘Concentration’ or ‘Memory Game’), can be played alone (as a type of 'Solitaire'), or in pairs, or groups. It is an excellent way to improve memory, or concentration!

**Firstly** the children should familiarise themselves with the cards (if they have not done so already, above) by laying them out and matching them up. Then play Pelmanism:

* The cards are all placed face-down in rows, but mixed up. Each player, in turn, turns over two cards, hoping to find two matching ones.
* They should say the words for the two that they turn over – whether pictures or words.
* If they are not a match, they turn them back over, returning them to the original positions.
* The other player then turns over two cards.
* When they find a match, they remove (and keep) the two cards.
* The winner is the one with the most pairs of cards at the end.

***Some variations:***

Generally, when a player finds a match, they have another go. This can leave their partner discouraged if their partner finds match after match. Sometimes it’s best if they have one turn each regardless.

* You could use a dice, and they turn over the number of cards (or pairs) according to the number they throw.
* The game can be played with larger cards on the board, blu-tacked facing the board. Groups could have turns at choosing cards to turn.
* There could be two of each word cards, no pictures. Or one card with the word, and one with a meaning.
* The children could play the game ‘Snap’ (in pairs or groups) with the cards, for extra fun.

NOTE: As the game can be played with any number of players or even just one, this is something they can practise if they finish their other work early. Packs of cards from previous lessons can be kept and used as well for revision.

**Just six words, with their pictures or meanings, makes a set of 12 cards, or a larger set can be used.**

NOTE: Less durable sets can be made using regular printing paper - just make sure it's not too easy to see through the paper! (Some brands of paper used in Malaysian schools are too thin for this.) If the words are printed smaller they are more difficult to see through the paper.

## 6. Play a few games of BINGO!

Create **BINGO!** cards with any number of words up to 25. By the time the children have been focussing on their cards looking for particular words, they will find that they know them well. By using a Bingo Card Creator (such as the one mentioned below) you will have a set of cards which each include the same words but in a different arrangement.

***Go here to make cards quickly and easily:*** [***http://www.eslactivities.com/bingo.php***](http://www.eslactivities.com/bingo.php)
Initially the teacher should be the caller, but soon children can take a turn.

* The **winner** is the first player to get five words in a row (if there are 25 words) - a straight line vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. They call out BINGO! and the teacher checks their card.
* The **winner** of a round can be given a real prize (or a round of applause) and/or asked to call the next round – giving them extra practice at recognising and reading (loudly and clearly).
* Instead of the caller reading the words, they could show a picture, or they could give a clue (such as the meaning of the word). The Bingo Card Creator includes the option of typing in a 'clue' for each word to create 'Call Cards'.
* Rather than marking the Bingo card with a pen/pencil, use small objects as markers – e.g. sunflower seeds, or counters – which can be placed on each word as it is called, and removed to start another game.
* If you are playing several times (and you should!) the children could periodically swap cards with each other so that they are looking for the same words in different positions.
* You can also make a Bingo card with just pictures ***(at*** [***http://www.eslactivities.com/picturebingo.php***](http://www.eslactivities.com/picturebingo.php) ***)*** and call the words so that the players find the right picture.

## 7. Create a WORD SEARCH puzzle

Kids (and adults) love playing these puzzles.
And it's really easy to make your own including exactly the words you want.

They can be created quickly and easily on many websites.
*My* favourite is: [**http://www.armoredpenguin.com/wordsearch/**](http://www.armoredpenguin.com/wordsearch/) **.**

Simply type in your words, select your options for printing (font size, grid lines etc.) and create a PDF. If you don’t like it, go 'back' and make changes. It’s a painless way to have students focussing on a set of words for a while.

The options list can be a little daunting the first time, so the options I usually choose are:

* Give it a **title**, add your **name**, (and a description if you want) - these appear at the top of your printed puzzle.
* **Colour of puzzle** - choose black rather than red (and leave the background as white)
* **Size of font for puzzle grid** - I find '1' is big enough
* **Size of font for word list** - I usually choose '0'
* **PDF page size** - this is set to the USA 'letter', you might want to change it to A4
* **PDF font style** - I find 'Comic Sans' is nice.
* **Covert all to lower case** - yes, I leave that one as it is
* **Aspect ratio** - sometimes I find it's better if I choose 'more columns than rows', just see how it comes out first.
* **Puzzle format** - you need to think about how complicated you want the puzzle to be, do you want to include reversed words and diagonals.
* **Grid lines** - I always tick this one

And then I click on "**Make Puzzle**".
When the puzzle comes up it looks a bit funny - uneven, with weird grid lines - because it is in HTML. So then I select '**Printable PDF**'.
I can then save this file as a PDF (to use again and again) or just print it out.
If I don't like something about it I go 'back' and click the '**Make Puzzle**' again.

Then I go back to the HTML puzzle page and click on '**Answer Key PDF**' and save that as well.

## 8. Find a RHYMING WORD

Words are easier to remember when they have a rhyming word – even (or especially) if it’s a silly rhyme. There are rhyming dictionaries on the Internet where you can find words to pair with the vocabulary words.

## 9. ALLITERATE

Find other words that start with the same letter.

* If the word is a noun, find an adjective starting with the same letter.
* If the word in a verb, find an adverb (-ly) starting with the same letter.
* If the word is an adjective, match it to a noun starting with the same letter.