

Learning Vocabulary – A Practical Approach

Which words should you learn? You will hear and read many new words. It will be difficult to remember all of them. Therefore, you will have to pick out the words that you most want to learn.

Which words should I learn?

You need to think about how useful a word may be to you. Some words may be suited to more casual and informal types of discourse, whereas others may more often occur in more formal and serious types of discourse. Try to consider how frequently a word or expression is used and in which sort of context it would be used. This can help you decide whether it is worth your time and effort to learn a word. Vocabulary words do not always occur alone. You need to take note of whether certain words are often used with other words in what we could call “fixed expressions” or “collocations”. (wreak havoc)

Observing words in context is the best way to learn new vocabulary. However, it could be difficult to decide just which words to make an effort to learn. Words can fall into two categories for learners of English and English first language speakers alike: passive vocabulary and active vocabulary. Of course, there is some gray area where these two categories are concerned. We can also refer to passive and active vocabulary as receptive and productive.

What your purpose is in learning English will determine how much effort you should give to incorporating certain words into your active and productive vocabulary. Try to understand the contextual nature of vocabulary. How is a word used? Why is it used? Where is it used? When is it used?

What do I need to learn about a word?

A dictionary can give you information about the following: spelling, meaning, pronunciation, part of speech, inflected forms, grammatical features, collocations, similar or opposite words, and example phrases or sentences. When you write a word in your notebook, you may choose to write some or all of this information. It is up to you to decide how much information you are going to record. It is important to consider the following: Do I want to make this word part of my active vocabulary? Or is this a word that I want to understand when I read and listen? If you want to make a word part of your active vocabulary, then you should take notes on: spelling, meaning, pronunciation, part of speech, inflected forms, grammatical features, collocations, similar or opposite words, and example phrases or sentences.

How should you go about learning new words?

You should learn words in context. Don't just memorize them. Notice how and where a word or expression is used. Try to find an interesting article in a newspaper or a magazine. Listen to English as much as possible: National Public Radio, BBC, movies, films, and music. Make notes of what you hear that is new. You can record radio shows in order to listen again.

Write new words and expressions in a vocabulary notebook. You can put words in alphabetical order. You can divide your notebook into sections for different parts of speech. Arranging words by date – the order in which you find them – is probably the easiest, but it is not necessarily the best. Do what is best for you. Try to be organized. You can record the words on a cassette and include useful information.

I recommend Longman Dictionaries or Cambridge Dictionaries. The following online resources are useful: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/> <http://nhd.heinle.com/home.aspx>

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See also: <http://www.personal.rdg.ac.uk/~lls01pat/learning%20vocab.pdf>

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