

# how to ... activate vocabulary

by Scott Thornbury

**natural  
English**

teacher development

## session overview

**aim** to develop and apply criteria which can be used to evaluate material designed to activate vocabulary

### trainees will ...

- review some of the principles underlying the activation of vocabulary
- experience a sequence of tasks designed to activate vocabulary
- analyse activity sequences from the point of view of vocabulary learning principles

### materials

- **natural English** intermediate student's book
- photocopies of worksheets for stages 1 and 3, and word cards for stage 2
- **natural English** intermediate teacher's book *pp.136–142*

### outline plan

stage	timing	interaction
1 warmer – matching task	10–15 minutes	individuals; pairs; open class report
2 experiential task	25–30 minutes	open class; groups of 3–4
3 post-task reflection	15–20 minutes	pairs; open class
4 extension activity	20–25 minutes	pairs / small groups; open class report

[www.oup.com/elt/teacher/naturalenglish](http://www.oup.com/elt/teacher/naturalenglish)

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### detailed plan

stage	procedure
<p>stage 1 <b>warmer</b> <i>10–15 minutes</i></p>	<p>Photocopy and distribute <b>worksheet for stage 1</b> and ask the trainees, working individually, to match the two parts of each extract.</p> <p>They should check their answers in pairs, and then go on to discuss, briefly, the implications of any of the statements that particularly interest them. Allow time for an open class sharing of opinions.</p> <p>Note: in the interests of time, this task could be set as a pre-sessional activity, with a brief check and discussion in class before moving to stage 2.</p>
<p>stage 2 <b>experiential task</b> <i>25–30 minutes</i></p>	<p>Copy and cut up <b>worksheet for stage 2</b>, so that there is one set of word cards per group of (roughly) four trainees – there are 15 words per set. If the cards are mounted onto card, they will be more easily manipulated as well as more durable.</p> <p>Write the following Maori* words on the board, or onto an overhead transparency, along with their English equivalents:</p> <p><i>kereru</i> = pigeon <i>makimaki</i> = monkey <i>hipi</i> = sheep <i>kaka</i> = parrot <i>tuna</i> = eel <i>kiwi</i> = kiwi <i>kuri</i> = dog <i>ruru</i> = owl <i>mako</i> = shark <i>wheke</i> = octopus <i>poaka</i> = pig <i>tohora</i> = whale</p> <p>Ask the trainees first to repeat the words as you read them from the list. (Note: the pronunciation closely follows the spelling, with vowels pronounced more or less as they would be in Italian, Spanish, or Japanese. The <i>wh-</i> in <i>wheke</i> is pronounced as an <i>f</i>. The stress is on the first syllable in every case.)</p>

Now ask the trainees, working individually and silently, to try to learn as many of the words as they can in five minutes. Then, with your hand or a piece of card, cover the English equivalents of individual words, in a random order, and see if trainees can tell you what its Maori equivalent means.

Then do the same in reverse, i.e. cover individual Maori words in random order, until satisfied that most of the class can recall most of the words.

Then, one by one, erase the English words, checking each time that the class knows what its Maori equivalent means. Do the same with the Maori words, until the board is clear. At this point, you might ask them how well they think they have learned the words, and what kinds of memory techniques they used to help them learn the words (e.g. similarity with the English equivalent, word associations e.g. *hipi – hippie*, etc.).

Now, divide the class into groups of four. Hand out the sets of word cards you have prepared in advance, one set per group.

Ask the trainees to work together, and to do the following tasks one by one, checking in open class the results of each task in turn as the groups complete them. (First point out that they learned twelve words but that there are fifteen in the set of word cards.)

- 1 Eliminate the three words that weren't included at the learning stage.
- 2 Put the remaining words in the order that they were originally presented on the board.
- 3 Match any pairs that rhyme.
- 4 Group the twelve words into three sets of four words each, so that each word in the set has something in common.
- 5 Decide which could be the odd-one-out in each set of four – and why.
- 6 Choose one member of each set of four that the group agrees would make a good pet – and why.
- 7 Choose one set of four and rank the four according to the probable results of a race i.e. Who would win, come second, etc.?
- 8 Then, individual members of the group take turns to either draw or imitate the sound or gait of one of the items, while the others try to guess which one it is – using its Maori name.
- 9 Finally, each group member chooses one of the 12 words and writes a true / false sentence (in English, but using the relevant Maori), which he or she then reads out to the group, who decide if it is true or false.

When students are doing these tasks, and when they are reporting the results to the whole class, they should be encouraged to use the Maori words rather than their English equivalents, embedding them in English sentences. If at any stage a group cannot remember the Maori word, the teacher can be asked to supply it – but this should be done by giving the first letter, then the second, and so on, until someone in the group successfully recalls the word.

\* Maori is a Polynesian language, spoken by the indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand. If some or all trainees are already familiar with Maori, you should adapt this activity, using a language that is unfamiliar to the group.

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stage 3

## post-task reflection

15–20 minutes

Ask the trainees, working in the same groups (or, if more convenient, in pairs), to recall, as far as they can remember, the sequence of activities they have just done in groups.

Then distribute **worksheet for stage 3**. Ask trainees:

- a to classify the different task-types according to these categories:
  - ordering / ranking
  - matching
  - selecting
  - sorting
  - guessing
- b to rate each activity in terms of the amount of ‘cognitive depth’ involved (using the categories *high, medium, low*)
- c to decide if the focus of the task is primarily on form or on meaning
- d to decide if the task process involves word recognition only, or production

Allow time for an open class discussion afterwards.

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stage 4

## application task

15 minutes

Distribute copies of **natural English** intermediate student’s book.

Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Ask each group to look at a different **wordbooster** section (see, for example, pages 16, 25, 39, 48, 63, etc.). Ask them to study the sequence of activities and to identify how ‘deeper processing’ tasks are built into the sequence in order to support vocabulary learning. Specifically, look for those features that were mentioned in the matching task (stage 1), i.e.:

- manipulation
- drawing connections to other words
- personalization
- recalling items for productive use
- meeting or using the word in new contexts

Ask them also to think of activities (such as those they experienced in stage 2) that could be incorporated into the sequence in order to optimize learning even further.

If there’s time, reorganize the groups so that each new group contains at least one member from each of the original groups, and ask trainees to share their ideas.

Spokespeople from each group can then report to the class on their findings.

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## trainer's notes

### stage 1 warmer

The answers to the matching task are: 1–C; 2–E; 3–B; 4–A; 5–D.

Here are the extracts in full:

- 1 'The human lexicon is believed to be a network of associations, a web-like structure of interconnected links ... When students are asked to manipulate words, relate them to other words and to their own experiences, and then to justify their choices, these word associations are reinforced.'  
Sökmen, A.J., in Schmitt, N. and McCarthy, M. (Eds.), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy* (1997) pp.241–242.  
Reproduced by permission of Cambridge University Press.
- 2 'The act of successfully recalling an item increases the chance that the item will be remembered ... It appears that the retrieval route to that item is in some way strengthened by being successfully used.'  
Baddeley, A., *Human Memory: Theory and Practice (Revised edition)* (1997) p.112. Reproduced by permission of Psychology Press.
- 3 'The more one manipulates, thinks about, and uses mental information, the more likely it is that one will retain that information. In the case of vocabulary, the more one engages with a word (deeper processing), the more likely the word will be remembered for later use.'  
Schmitt, N., *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* (2000) p.120.  
Reproduced by permission of Cambridge University Press.
- 4 'When words are met in reading and listening or used in speaking and writing, the generativeness of the context will influence learning. That is, if the words occur in new sentence contexts in the reading text, learning will be helped. Similarly, having to use the word to say new things will add to learning.'  
Nation, I.S.P., *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (2001) p.80  
Reproduced by permission of Cambridge University Press.
- 5 'A learner's active/productive vocabulary is always smaller than his or her passive/receptive vocabulary. That is, learners might be able to recognize a given lexical item when it is presented to them or they may be able to infer its meaning, but this is not at all the same thing as recalling items for use.'  
Carter, R., *Vocabulary: Applied Linguistic Perspectives (Second Edition)* (1998) p.213. Reproduced by permission of Routledge.

The implications of these statements that should be highlighted in the open class discussion include:

- The importance of activities that require learners to retrieve words from memory.
- The importance of ‘deeper processing’ tasks – that is, tasks that require learners to make decisions about words involving increasing degrees of ‘cognitive depth’, such as manipulating them, relating them to words they know, and personalizing them. The more and the ‘deeper’ the decisions, the more likely it is that the words will be learned.
- The importance of activities that require learners to produce words (rather than simply recognize them) if the words are going to become part of their active vocabulary.
- The importance of meeting (and re-meeting) and using words in new contexts.

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## stage 2 **experiential task**

It is important that all learners are involved in this activity sequence, so that they can experience at first hand the problems related to vocabulary learning in a second language, as well as appreciating the benefits of having to make many different decisions about a set of pre-taught words.

It may be interesting to test memory of these words in a subsequent session, e.g. by providing the English translations and seeing if trainees can correctly supply the Maori equivalent.

The three words that were not included at the introduction stage are: *moko* (lizard), *ika* (fish), and *kiore* (rat).

Rhyming pairs are: *kaka* and *poaka*, *ruru* and *kereru*.

It is expected that the words will be classified accordingly:

- *kereru, kaka, kiwi, ruru* (birds)
- *makimaki, hipi, kuri, poaka* (land mammals)
- *tuna, mako, wheke, tohora* (fish and other animals living in water)

The odd-one-out task can be answered in any number of ways – the important thing is that a reason is given for the choice. Possible answers might be *kiwi* (it’s flightless); *makimaki* (it’s not a farm or domestic animal); *tohora* (it’s a mammal).

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## stage 3 **post-task reflection**

The table should be completed accordingly (see next page), although opinions may differ with regard to the amount of cognitive depth involved in some of the activities. Note that the first three activities can be done without reference to the meaning of the words – that is, the mental processes involve simply recognizing and ordering the forms of the words, or matching forms that rhyme. All the subsequent activities require learners to know the meanings of the words if they are to be able

to do the task.

Note also that all the activities, apart from the last two, start with the forms (written on cards), and the learners have either to *recognize* these forms, ignoring their meaning, or to *recognize* the forms and match them with a meaning – in either case, they are *recognition* activities. (Of course, in negotiating the task outcome with their colleagues, and in reporting the task outcome to the class, they will *produce* many of the targeted words, but this is a (healthy) by-product of working co-operatively, and is not intrinsic to the successful performance of the task. It would be quite different if learners were working individually, and with no report stage. The need to constantly recycle the targeted words in group work is one of the advantages of this kind of organization.)

The final two activities (guessing the words, and writing true / false sentences) are *production* activities, however. The true / false activity starts with a meaning (represented by a drawing, mime, or sound effect) and the learner has to *produce* the relevant form. In the sentence-writing task, learners first *produce* the selected item in a mini-context. Of course, when they read the sentence aloud to their colleagues, the focus becomes *recognition* again.

<b>activity</b>	<b>activity type:</b> ordering / ranking, matching, selecting, sorting, or guessing?	<b>cognitive depth:</b> high, medium, low?	<b>focus on form or meaning?</b>	<b>recognition or production?</b>
<b>eliminate 3 words</b>	selecting	low	form	recognition
<b>original order</b>	ordering	medium	form	recognition
<b>rhyming pairs</b>	matching	low	form	recognition
<b>3 categories</b>	sorting	high	meaning	recognition
<b>odd-one-out</b>	selecting	high	meaning	recognition
<b>a good pet?</b>	selecting	medium	meaning	recognition
<b>race results?</b>	ranking	medium / high	meaning	recognition
<b>guess the word</b>	guessing	low	meaning	production
<b>true / false</b>	(sentence writing)	medium / high	meaning	production

Finally, it should be clear from the chart that the sequencing of the tasks is not arbitrary, but that there is a deliberate progression from form-focused to meaning-focused tasks, from recognition to production tasks, and in general, from tasks involving low processing demands to tasks involving relatively high processing demands.

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## stage 4 **extension activity**

Trainees should note that the **wordbooster** task sequences always involve at least two stages, and hence two sets of decisions to be made about the same words. These decisions may involve manipulating the words in some way, such as exercises that focus first on the form of words and then require learners to put them into meaningful contexts, such as in the sequence *prefixes* (p.109). Or they may involve the formation of word association networks, such as the use of 'spidergrams' (see p.84, *phrases with go and get*).

Trainees should note the high number of production and personalization tasks included in the **wordbooster** sections. Examples of production tasks, in which previously met items are recalled for productive use, include the second exercise in *hotel rooms* (p.25) and the third exercise in *likes and dislikes* (p.39). Personalization tasks include the second exercise in *jobs* (p.16), parts 2 and 3 of *people in your life* (p.84), and the second task in *shopping* (p.140).

Word manipulations activities – such as the ranking, selecting, matching and sorting type of activities discussed in stage 3 – could be inserted at strategic points in these task sequences in order to provide further decision-making opportunities, thereby adding extra layers of 'cognitive depth'.

As a follow-up (or a pre-session) reading task, you might want to refer trainees to the teacher development chapter 'how to ... activate vocabulary' on pp.136–142 of the **natural English** intermediate teacher's book.



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## worksheet for stage 1

Try to match the first half (1–5) and second half (A–E) of each extract. They are all on the subject of learning vocabulary.

Then, think about the implications of any or all of these statements in terms of teaching vocabulary. Be prepared to share your ideas with the rest of the class.

<b>1</b> 'The human lexicon is believed to be a network of associations, a web-like structure of interconnected links.'	<b>A</b> 'That is, if the words occur in new sentence contexts in the reading text, learning will be helped. Similarly, having to use the word to say new things will add to learning.' Nation, I.S.P. (2001)
<b>2</b> 'The act of successfully recalling an item increases the chance that the item will be remembered.'	<b>B</b> 'In the case of vocabulary, the more one engages with a word (deeper processing), the more likely the word will be remembered for later use.' Schmitt, N. (2000)
<b>3</b> 'The more one manipulates, thinks about, and uses mental information, the more likely it is that one will retain that information.'	<b>C</b> 'When students are asked to manipulate words, relate them to other words and to their own experiences, and then to justify their choices, these word associations are reinforced.' Sökmen, A.J. (1997)
<b>4</b> 'When words are met in reading and listening or used in speaking and writing, the generativeness of the context will influence learning.'	<b>D</b> 'That is, learners might be able to recognize a given lexical item when it is presented to them or they may be able to infer its meaning, but this is not at all the same thing as recalling items for use.' Carter, R. (1998)
<b>5</b> 'A learner's active/productive vocabulary is always smaller than his or her passive/receptive vocabulary.'	<b>E</b> 'It appears that the retrieval route to that item is in some way strengthened by being successfully used.' Baddeley, A. (1997)

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## worksheet for stage 2

kereru	tuna	mako
moko	kiwi	wheke
makimaki	kuri	poaka
hipi	ruru	kiore
kaka	ika	tohora

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## worksheet for stage 3

Think back on the activities you have just done, and complete this table as best you can.

<b>activity</b>	<b>activity type:</b> ordering / ranking, matching, selecting, sorting, or guessing?	<b>cognitive depth:</b> high, medium, low?	<b>focus on form or meaning?</b>	<b>recognition or production?</b>
eliminate 3 words				
original order				
rhyming pairs				
3 categories				
odd-one-out				
a good pet?				
race results?				
guess the word				
true / false	(sentence writing)			