

A bag of tricks

Elizabeth Lee
extols the virtues of
vocabulary cards.

Most teachers have their favourite trick(s) for filling up a few minutes of extra time, activities that involve no preparation, and I am certainly no exception. My personal favourite is the versatile vocabulary card (VC), which has the advantage that it serves some purpose, rather than just filling in time.

What is a VC?

A vocabulary card is simply a small slip of paper with an item of vocabulary on one side and the corresponding definition on the reverse. The vocabulary, though, is not just a word taken at random from a coursebook by the teacher, but vocabulary that has come up during the lesson, language that the students have actually wanted. Moreover, the definition on the back is not simply a dictionary definition, but one written by the students themselves. This idea might not seem particularly startling, but its beauty lies in the actual writing of the definitions and the constant re-use of the VCs that follows.

Are you ready?

Prior to beginning the writing of VCs, I discuss with the class different ways of explaining things if you don't know the precise word. I do this by eliciting various techniques, such as using antonyms, synonyms, approximations, examples, etc and/or more formally by tying it in with a section in a coursebook. I then explain the importance of such strategies in my own everyday life (that is being a native English speaker living in Italy). This language is then put into

practice with the writing of the first lot of VCs using, when possible, new language that has come up during the lesson.

Explanation

Following this, I explain to the students that during the course new vocabulary will be recorded on the VCs, stored in a plastic bag and attached to the wall with a tack so that they can revise the vocabulary at any time before, during or after the lesson. Thus students who arrive early or finish activities before the others have something to do.

Clarity

From the very beginning it is important to emphasise the necessity for clear explanations and handwriting if other students are to use the VCs successfully. In fact, as soon as a few cards have been written, I put the students into pairs to test each other: one student reads the definition, the other has to remember or guess the word. At this early stage, the problems of lack of clarity in the definitions and bad handwriting become evident to the students and this (hopefully) encourages them to take greater care in future.

Grammar and accuracy

Accuracy of grammar and meaning remain central to the writing of the cards, and I always check them before they go in the bag. I often find that here, rather than in longer written work, students have greater problems manipulating the language effectively. Also, by checking the definitions immediately, the students receive direct feedback on their use of English (as opposed to delayed comments on homework, or general class feedback which might not be directly relevant to them). At this stage, it can also be useful to add phonetic script and stress marks, thus aiding correct pronunciation as well as visual recall.

Student-generated cards

Why?

Some teachers write the vocabulary definitions themselves, but this goes against two or three of my favourite principles of VCs; the teacher has to spend time thinking of and writing the definitions (ie there is preparation time involved), the cards are no longer student-generated and the time-filling function of the VCs is reduced.

When?

When do the students write these cards? The answer is simple: whenever there is a free moment, perhaps at the beginning or end of the class, or when they are waiting for other students to finish an activity, thus serving the double function of giving slower or more rigorous students the necessary time to finish the task and keeping the fast finishers occupied in a productive way.

Where?

Another great thing about VCs is that they work well at all levels. I tend to use them from pre-intermediate level upwards as the students by then have encountered enough English to allow them to write accurate definitions. At times I have used them with elementary levels; here, though, I prefer to use direct translations so as to avoid using up too much class time and energy. On the other hand, you would be surprised at how difficult higher-level students find it to write short, grammatically correct sentences which explain accurately the meaning of a word or phrase.

Multiple uses

The ever-increasing store of VCs is now ready to be put to further use.

► Tests and quizzes

Students test themselves individually by reading the definition, trying to remember the word and then checking by turning over the card, or vice versa: reading the vocabulary and trying to remember the definition. This can be done as a class activity or when individual students have finished an activity before the others. A similar activity can be done in pairs or small groups and this makes a good warmer, cooler or filler. For a more fun version, the teacher or a student can act as the compere in a class quiz.

► Categorising

The students divide the VCs into three groups: words that are, for them, positive, negative or neutral, any answers being acceptable provided they can justify them. The first time I do this activity, I have the students work individually. They then read out their lists and the other students have to guess which list is positive, which negative and which neutral. This often

involves much questioning and discussion. The next time I do it, I put the students in pairs or small groups so that they have to discuss and agree on their responses prior to sorting the cards.

A follow up to this is to give students other categories for dividing the words, eg words they like or don't like, words they remember or don't remember well, parts of speech, very useful words and those they think will be less useful. You could also have the students divide the vocabulary according to categories of their own.

Such categorising encourages students to think more deeply about vocabulary and their connection to it.

Another great thing about VCs is that they work well at all levels

► Oral gap-fill

Students write sentences containing examples of the target vocabulary. They then read a sentence to their partner or group but omit the target word. The other students have to guess the missing word. I demonstrate the activity first and emphasise that some answers are *'possible but not the one I'm looking for'*, thus encouraging the students to think not only about the word on the card but other possibilities.

► Pronunciation

To work on pronunciation, students mouth the vocabulary to their partner and the partner has to lip-read. This is good for getting students to think about facial movement and position, which for some language learners can be a problem which hinders pronunciation. This is obviously not the easiest of activities, but it makes students think not only about the meaning of the vocabulary but also its correct pronunciation.

► A-Z

One VC is given to each student. They then mingle and try to compile an A-Z of the vocabulary, with each letter of the alphabet having one vocabulary item. Before they mingle, they are told that they cannot simply say the word on the

card, but must give the definition and, if necessary, the first letter. The activity thus provides good listening practice.

► Oral stories


The students work in pairs or groups and each student is given several VCs. They have to take turns to tell a story, which includes the vocabulary on their cards. The story can be as fantastic as they want, but it must be internally coherent, not just a set of unconnected sentences. As they say a word, they put down the card and another student continues the story until all the words have been used up. This provides nice 'fluency' counterpoise to the more rigid 'accuracy' of the actual definition-writing stage of the VCs.

► Written stories

This is a written version of the previous activity. To make it more fun, when the students have finished writing their story, they read it out to the class. When they arrive at one of the items of vocabulary, they 'beep' the word and the others have to guess or work out what it is.

Student feedback

You will have gathered by now that I am a big fan of VCs, but what do the students think of them? Well, I've used them with numerous students and the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. The students seem to be proud of the cards they have written and always want to know if their definitions are correct. In fact, I can think of only two students this year who groan when they have to write a VC (both advanced level students), but even they always want their card to be checked.

The activities above have proved popular, fun and motivating here in Italy and previously in Spain. Furthermore, whilst not all students automatically reach for the cards when they have a spare moment, plenty of them do, thus taking the opportunity to do more vocabulary work. 



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