



Metacognitive Activities for Vocabulary Growth

by [Rita F. Naughton](#)

One of the most formidable hurdles in learning any language is vocabulary (Peregoy & Boyle 2017, p. 252). Simply stated, learning English vocabulary can be complicated, owing to the complexity of the English lexicon. Students of the language will notice words with overlapping meanings, words combined with other words to form a single entity, words defined by their relationship with other words, and words that sound the same but have different meanings.

The purpose here is to present engaging vocabulary activities through the implementation of metacognition: “the processes used to plan, monitor, and assess one’s understanding and performance. Metacognition includes a critical awareness of a) one’s thinking and learning and b) oneself as a thinker and learner” (Chick, 2020).

The following activities for metacognitive growth aim to be accessible to all English language classes. They can be reproduced with minimal preparation if necessary, to meet the needs of educators with limited resources. These activities are adaptable, modifiable, and can be used in various learning environments. They are unique because they apply three types of metacognition as a vehicle for vocabulary learning:

- **Metacognitive Knowledge:** knowledge about how learning operates and how to improve learning.
- **Metacognitive Monitoring:** judging whether you are approaching the correct solution to the problem and assessing how well you understand what you are reading.
- **Metacognitive Control:** deciding to use a new tactic to solve a difficult problem; deciding to use a new approach for a difficult task.
(Dunlosky, 2009, p. 3)

1. Word of the Day Poster Presentation

Steps

1. Depending on the objectives of your vocabulary lesson, have students choose a word to present (a) or let them choose from a selection (b):

- a. Allowing students the freedom to choose any word, such as one they saw in print (e.g., in a book, sign, label, pamphlet, poem) and want to explore further can provide a motivating factor to the activity.
 - b. It can be very effective to present a list of words within specific parameters, such as words related to a particular unit, lesson, or topic.
- Explain they will describe, illustrate, and define their word on a poster in multiple ways: synonyms, antonyms, word origin, number of syllables, collocations, and so on.
2. As students create their poster, they should ask themselves these questions to bolster true understanding of the vocabulary:
 - a. Do I understand this definition?
 - b. Will my classmates understand this definition? If not, should I phrase it in a different way, so it is clear to them?
 - c. Are these synonyms and antonyms words I already know and understand?
 - d. Do my classmates know the words I present as synonyms and antonyms?
 - e. Is my illustration a true representation of this word?
 - f. Will my classmates understand my illustration?
 - g. If not, should I use multiple illustrations to help me and my classmates better visualize and learn this word?
 3. On the day of the Word of the Day Poster presentation, the audience is encouraged to guess the meaning, part of speech, or pronunciation of the word. Both student presenter and audience monitor their understanding of the word and are encouraged to ask questions to strengthen their understanding.
 4. Once the poster is complete, it is posted for all to see and revisit at the end of the week/month. This activity can be done online as well as in the classroom.

Metacognitive Benefits

Students must decide how, why, and to what extent to present their chosen word. In other words, they must determine the best ways to present the vocabulary word for learning and retention. As students create their poster, they monitor and assess. By asking themselves the list of questions, they judge their approach and are encouraged to self-monitor.

By approaching this activity metacognitively, students are in control of their own learning and are more apt to discover how they and others learn vocabulary best. These posters will aid their preparation for their vocabulary test and assist in evaluating learning and planning for the future “word of the day” posters.

2. Rating and Raising Word Knowledge (Rate It)

Steps

1. Using a new word list, have students rate their knowledge of the words according to the following rating system.
 - 0 – This word is new to me; I have never seen or heard this word before.
 - 1 – This word is not new to me; I have seen it or heard it, but I do not know what it means.
 - 2 – I think I know the meaning of the word and will guess it.
 - 3 – I can explain the meaning of the word and use it in a sentence (Coxhead, 2014).
2. Once the students have rated their words, have them to do the following:
 - a. For words identified as “3,” write the definition of the word and a corresponding sentence.
 - b. For words identified as “2,” write down what you think the meaning is. Make the following guesses:
 - i. Write the part of speech.
 - ii. Write prefixes, suffixes, and the root of the word.
 - iii. Write the context in which the word is used (the words that are around this word and affect its meaning).
 - iv. Write the circumstance in which the word is used (the register of the word).
 - c. For words identified as “1,” answer as many of the questions as you can:
 - i. If I think I know this word, why do I think so?
 - ii. Have I heard it?
 - iii. When was the last time I heard someone use this word?
 - iv. Have I seen it?
 - v. Where was the last place I saw this word?
 - vi. Why don’t I know this word well?
 - vii. Why is it so puzzling to me?
 - d. For words identified as “0,” you can guess or leave alone.
3. When all of the students are done deducing the meaning of these words, have them compare the definitions of the words in small groups (two to four students).
4. After, bring students together as one class and share the meanings of the words.
5. Verify if the 3 rating is correct and have students read their sentences and explain how they know the word.
6. If the 3 rating is incorrect, ask the students the following questions:
 - a. Why did you think this word had that definition?

- b. When do you think you heard the word used before?
 - c. Where had you seen the word before?
7. Ask the students who rated the word with a 1–2 (and who guessed correctly) to explain the process they used which led them to the correct definition.
 8. Encourage students to explain their guesses for words rated 1 and 2.
 9. Conclude the activity by asking students what they learned about vocabulary learning using the rating system.
 10. Encourage the students to reuse the strategies they incorporated in discovering the meaning of their words.

Metacognitive Benefits

To comprehend the meaning of their new vocabulary word list, students assessed what they knew and did not know. For words rated 1 and 2, students were obligated to use metacognition. They made guesses based on their prior knowledge, analyzed the vocabulary words, and made logical deductions. These deductions derived from their knowledge of word parts and word knowledge. Thus, the correct meaning may have been reached as a result of the student's knowledge of the root, prefix, or suffix of the word; the word being a cognate of their first language; or their ability to reconstruct the context and register in which the word was seen or heard.

Students glean the reward of metacognition by explaining their word learning process and experiences. Through metacognition, they judge how they came to the correct or incorrect solutions. They can then use the metacognitive monitoring learned in this activity to tackle future encounters with new vocabulary.

3. Vocabulary Quilt

Steps

1. Before class, create a blank vocabulary quilt and accompanying vocabulary cards. The quilt is a colorful, blank chart presented on a large poster. The chart should have four columns, each labeled for a different part of speech (or word family); the number of rows depends on the number of vocabulary words you wish to use in this activity. (See Figure 1.) The vocabulary cards should be colorful cards that fit into the spaces on the chart; there should be a corresponding card for each space on the chart.



Figure 1. Example blank vocabulary quilt using four parts of speech.

2. In class, distribute the vocabulary cards to students and ask them to quietly guess the part of speech of each card.
3. Present the vocabulary quilt to students, and then place it on a table in the center of the room. Have students gather around the table.
4. One at a time, students choose a word card and place it in the column corresponding to the correct part of speech/word family.
5. As students place their cards on the table, they are encouraged to seek help from each other and determine the best strategy for card placement. Encourage students to talk to one another and strategize together how to complete the vocabulary quilt.
6. Ask students if they see any patterns being revealed in the vocabulary quilt chart.

- Once all the cards are placed on the quilt, check for correctness. See Figure 2 for an example of a completed quilt.

VERB	NOUN	ADJECTIVE	ADVERB
CATEGORIZE	CATEGORY	CATEGORICAL	CATEGORICALLY
CRITICIZE	CRITICISM	CRITICAL	CRITICALLY
EMPHASIZE	EMPHASIS	EMPHATIC	EMPHATICALLY
LEGALIZE	LEGALITY	LEGAL	LEGALLY
RATIONALIZE	RATIONALE	RATIONAL	RATIONALLY
TERRORIZE	TERROR	TERRIBLE	TERRIBLY
VISUALIZE	VISION	VISUAL	VISIBLY

Figure 2. Example of completed vocabulary quilt. In this case, the parts of speech cards are all in the same color for easier recognition. The colors of the cards can be randomized so the completed quilt presents a mix of colors.

- Have students evaluate the characteristics of each correct placement.
- Have students judge what they learned and how they learned it, and then have students identify the most helpful strategies they employed in this activity.

Options for Online Teaching

This activity can be done virtually via Zoom. Email students their vocabulary cards in advance and present the vocabulary quilt using PowerPoint or Google Slides. When it is time for the students to place their cards on the quilt, have them inform you where they would like to place their cards, and you can type their words into their designated location. The whole class would assist in the placement of the cards. All would assess if the cards were properly placed.

Alternatively, you can use an interactive whiteboard app, like [Jamboard](#) or [Seesaw](#), which allows you to share your digital quilt with students and have them place cards on their own, either in small groups or as a whole class.

Metacognitive Benefits

In this vocabulary quilt activity, students make deductions by checking for similarities of words in the categories. They consult one another for assistance and use strategies of elimination, agreement, and concession. In utilizing metacognition in the creation of the vocabulary quilt, students acquire knowledge about learning, assess how well they understand vocabulary, judge whether or not they make correct decisions, and monitor their choices and the choices of others.

Conclusion

The vocabulary activities presented here have been used in intermediate-level literacy courses, and the students who participated in these activities not only enjoyed them but attested that they were memorable and helped them improve their English vocabulary knowledge. I also noticed that these activities created fun, interactive experiences that enhanced vocabulary learning and activated metacognition.

References

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