

From drilling to skilling: effective independent vocabulary revision in MFL



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In my first lessons with a class I like to make an analogy between learning a language and building a house: the bricks are the vocabulary, the foundations the grammar and the concrete the pronunciation.

These three elements combined with the paint and decoration would make the house in the same way that the addition of semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (language in use) would make them proficient speakers in Spanish (or other Target Language (TL)). In order for my learners to perform well and confidently in comprehension and production skills in a foreign language, I need to ensure that these 'lower-order' skills (pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar) have been acquired first.

This article provides some suggestions of tasks to support students working independently with building resilience and engagement in the acquisition of vocabulary. In particular, I have chosen here some tried and tested activities to be completed when working remotely. They range from drilling to more communicative language practice.

When it comes to choosing specific word lists, it is essential that teachers base their decision on frequency and usefulness to the needs of their particular students. These tasks are to be incorporated once the relevant vocabulary has been introduced, and can, of course, be adapted to different languages and levels!

Remember!

When presenting vocabulary, consider the following:

- Should I divide the words into topic areas/ sets?
- Can I include cognates and teach students the origin of the words? The words in the L1 and the target language may share derivation, similar meaning or spelling, but have different pronunciation.
- What shall I ask the student to learn about the different vocabulary items - according to what they already know this might be :
 - a) Meaning in both directions?
 - b) Form (i.e. type of word, for example adjective, noun, verb, etc.)?
 - c) Pronunciation?
 - d) Spelling?

e) Potential irregularities, for example irregular verbs in the past tense in English?

f) Other contextual information, such as connotations of the word, synonyms, antonyms, etc.

g) All of these?

- Introduce the vocabulary in different ways to cater for different learning styles. These can include the following techniques:

a) showing pictures

b) using mimes or gestures

c) using real objects

d) illustrating synonyms, antonyms, etc. so that learners can make connections between words.

e) giving definitions

f) seeking translations

g) using context

A. Word lists

These activities help students with spelling, and they will take the learning into writing and into long-term memory! I ask them to :

- **Copy** a list of 15 to 20 words 3-5 times both in English and in Spanish by hand.

- **Complete a table:** look at the word both in English and Spanish, say the word, cover the translation in English, translate it into Spanish, check, translate again into English and repeat the process a couple of times.

Look		Say	Cover the Span	Translate into Span.	Check	Translate into Eng.	Check	Translate into Span.	Check
1. rojo	red			rosa-ROJO	x	red	✓	rojo	✓
2. negro	black								
3. white	blanco								
4. pink	rosa								
5. amarillo	yellow								

To help students revise the pronunciation of the words, I have created a YouTube Channel called 'v gonzalez otero' where they can listen, and repeat the vocabulary items for different topics.

As an extension task, students can select a few of the words from the list to create their own sentences in writing.

- **My Home learning** vocabulary revision guide for students in 12 steps:

1. Select 10 words to learn from your list.
2. Copy out your list neatly onto paper. Write the Spanish and English.
3. Read the Spanish and the English for each word.
4. Repeat three times.
5. Cover up the English.
6. Test yourself.
7. If you are not sure, have a look at the answer.
8. If you get a word wrong or have to check, start back at word number 1.
9. Repeat testing until you have got each word correct at least three times.
10. Create flashcards of the vocabulary that you have learned (English at the front, Spanish at the back).
11. Lay all the flashcards on the table with the English facing up.
12. Say the translation of each word aloud in Spanish. If you get it right, take the card away. If you get it wrong, look at the right translation and place it on the table again until you do get it right.



B. Picture-naming tasks

In these activities students are taught 10 to 15 words which are presented via a PowerPoint Presentation.

- Each word is presented three times in succession along with its spelling and a picture.
- The words appear three times in a row in three different sets randomly arranged each time.
- There is a one-minute break between each set of words, and students are not allowed to write down the words.
- Immediately after this training or practice phase, students have to record their voice repeating all the words they have learnt.
- Every picture remains on the screen for three seconds, and learners are expected to say the word in the target language out loud as soon as they see the illustration.



As shown on the picture from an English as a Foreign Language lesson, when practising students are presented with the word (France) and a picture and they hear its pronunciation (left). During the testing phase, learners are solely presented with the picture (right).

C. Input flooding and elicitation activities

On these tasks the teacher generates texts and exercises and adapts his/ her speech to focus on specific target words, and on phonics as well. The goal is to draw learners' attention to these words in the target language.

A good way of testing the production of students would be through the use of elicitation tasks, which involve using visual, verbal, written and/or oral cues to encourage learners to use the target words. These activities allow teachers to assess students' knowledge of vocabulary in semi-spontaneous writing and speaking. They also provide a valuable source of information for teachers to plan future lessons and see if there are any words that they need to come back to.

For instance, in writing learners are provided with ten words in the TL and they need to write a paragraph using connectives, tenses and complex linguistic structures they know, as well as including the vocabulary presented.

With regards to speaking, students are presented with a PowerPoint presentation consisting of a one minute digitally recorded story, accompanied by a timed sequence of related pictures, and read at a normal speed. They will listen to the story twice, and immediately afterwards, record themselves retelling the story with the help of the timed pictures presented at the same speed as in the original story.

D. Strategies to encourage emotional engagement

I like the way that Ghali and Frasson (2010) explain that "*information including an emotional component is more easily memorized than information presented without an emotional tone or with emotion deemed neutral*". The following activities are designed to help build learners' positive attitudes to, and engagement with, the language at the same time as assisting their learning.

- **MFL classroom challenge** (classroom task):

I have always found it very useful to observe lessons from other subject teachers, since the flexibility of languages means that we can incorporate ideas from any source of inspiration. This is what I did for the following activity, adapted from a Year 6 Maths lesson.

Each student is given a card (or two cards for higher ability learners) containing two words: the one at the top in English and the one at the bottom in Spanish.

- The person with the "Start" card will say the first word in Spanish.
- The person who has the card with the correct translation needs to say the word in English.
- Then they say the word in Spanish from their card.
- The third person translates it into English, and so on.
- The person who starts is also the person who finishes, so that everyone has the chance to say and translate a word!

The following is an example taken from a classroom lesson on picture description:

El reto... 3, 2, 1 ¡Vamos!				
Empezar/terminar	In the foreground	In the background	To the left	To the right
It seems to me that				
En primer plano	Al fondo	A la izquierda	A la derecha	Cerca de
Close to	In front of	It is sunny	It's nice weather	It's bad weather
Delante de	Hace sol	Hace buen tiempo	Hace mal tiempo	Está lloviendo
It's raining	It's cloudy	One can see	In the image	In the photo
Está nublado	Se puede ver	En la imagen	En la foto	Me parece que

This is one of my favourite activities because you can do it at any point of the lesson, on any topic and it can be differentiated as each colour (red, green and blue) corresponds to a specific level of difficulty. In addition, it is motivating for students since they work as a team to beat their own record, and can also compete against other classes and even different year groups.

- **Lyrics training.com**

This free online programme (also available to download on your phone or tablet) helps to practise vocabulary by filling the gaps in the lyrics of music videos either by writing the missing words or by selecting them from multiple-choice options. There are four different levels of difficulty, and confident students can also try the karaoke option, so they can read or sing along!

- **Mentimeter**

I think this is great for putting vocabulary into practice whilst engaging and interacting with students using real-time voting! I find it especially useful for brainstorming using word clouds. In the example below, for example, I asked an ALL webinar for teachers from different language backgrounds to describe themselves using three adjectives.



In this case, the word "kind" was most frequently used by participants, and so it has been given greater visual prominence by default.

- **Padlet:**

This amazing website provides a shared digital canvas where teachers can display information, and learners can type feedback, upload files, draw, add a link, take a photo or record video or voice. I have used it in my remote learning lessons for students to type new words that they learned during the session so that at the end of it they could include the words in their vocabulary book.

So, if vocabulary is to language what bricks are to a house, it is important and helpful to point out to students different ways of building up their stock of resources. Here I have written about some of my approaches; if you have ideas to share please do so via Twitter [@goveronica1](https://twitter.com/goveronica1).

Ghali, Ramla & Frasson, Claude. (2010). Emotional Strategies for Vocabulary Learning. 249-253. 10.1109/ICALT.2010.75.