

Break those rules!

First the rule-breaks. (Activities and ideas below.)

- 1 “Using cool visuals”: You don’t need all those funky colours.
- 2in fact, you don’t need physical pictures at all – you can use pictures-in-the-mind.
- 3 “Use song lyrics for language work”: Use them to STIMULATE language / vocab, not just for their lyrics. This is also true of music videos, especially b/w ones – see point 1 above.
- 4 “Don’t write in L1”: Allow students to take notes in L1, so they expand their vocab, not limit it.
- 5 “We use eyes, ears and mouth in the classroom”: Use the other senses, too.
- 6 “Tongue twisters and anagrams” are old hat: Use them to teach the physicality of words.
- 7 “Don’t do drills in class! Don’t do listen and repeat!”: Some students NEED these activities. Use them with awareness and thought.
- 8 “Be careful of Teacher Talking Time! Let the students do the talking!”: Well, yes, but not always. Some students NEED you to talk and to articulate clearly (VISIBLY clearly).
- 9 “Flashcards and realia are for kids!”: There are plenty ways you can use them with adults, too.
- 10 “Don’t translate!”: Yes, translate. You might as well – it’s happening anyway. And informed use of translation helps form memories.

Ten tip and ideas (actually, there are fourteen)

These tips are to help you work to the strengths of ALL your students, and provide ideas for working with colour-blind students, sight-impaired students, the hard of hearing, dyslexic students and others.

Colour-blind

Around 1 in 12 males and 1 in 200 females are colour-blind, so the chances are high that in any given class there is going to be at least one student with the condition. Colour-blindness or sight loss may be things that some students are sensitive about and wish to keep from their classmates. This means it’s helpful to use techniques that take these circumstances into account in all classes from day one. In this way, if you then become aware of any existing sight issues, you’ll have already been working to support the students in question.

1. Prepare visuals for colour-blind students

When you prepare a visual such as an image or a wordcloud (that is, a visual representation of a set of lexical items in the shape of a colourful ‘cloud’), take care to select colours that colour-blind students can distinguish easily. Most colour-blind people have difficulties with the red-brown-green part of the spectrum, but blue-black-grey can also present problems. Memory games and ‘spot-the-difference’ pictures for practising dynamic verbs are also areas for attention. Questions like *What’s the man in the red shorts doing?* and *Where is the boy in blue standing?* can easily be replaced with *What’s the man with glasses doing?* and *What’s the smallest boy doing?*. Prepare lessons by looking at the visuals in black and white: can you still identify the elements?

2. Use visualisation techniques

Using your voice and music for visualisation is effective when working with students who are blind or who have very low vision, because it gives those students complete control over what they ‘see’. As visualisation is a relaxing technique that is good for stimulating the imagination and memory, it works well with other students, too. Ask students to imagine a setting, and then ask what they hear (*voices*,

the wind, traffic ...), what they can smell (*flowers, food, suntan lotion ...*), how they feel – in both a tactile and an emotional sense – (*soft/wet/warm sand, pebbles; hungry, relaxed, intrigued ...*), how the air tastes (*salty, fresh*), and what they can sense behind them (*houses, mountains, people ...*). Take it slowly and allow a moment after each question for students to fully visualise and notice these different elements. They can think of words in their first language and then find out how to say them afterwards. They then tell their classmates what they felt, smelt, heard, etc. You can do a similar activity using music to prompt visualisation, too.

Sight-impaired

Working exclusively with blind students needs specific techniques on the part of the teacher at all times; but, in more general classes, always incorporating activities that play to such students' strengths, rather than occasionally planning 'special' activities, evens out everyone's chances of learning vocabulary.

3. Use the senses to generate vocabulary

The senses trigger the parts of the brain responsible for memory formation, so, by triggering the senses in class in a pleasurable way, you form positive memories and learning. Tell students to listen to three words or phrases and to use their phones to record 5–7 words they associate with each smell. Give students enough time to 'smell' and record, after each item. Three is the most effective, as some smells have more associations than others depending on the person. Try different threes from: *new car, bread, fishing town, grass, swimming pool, Christmas, the barber's or hairdressers*.

Access the sense of touch by using pairs of simple objects that are similar yet very different in one or more ways to generate lots of adjectives, e.g. two pebbles or shells. Ask a student to sit with their eyes closed and their cupped hands out in front of them. Put one object in each of the student's hands and allow the student to run their fingers over them for a moment. Then ask the student to describe the objects in great detail, telling you what they think they look like. Ask them to tell you about any memories the objects trigger (without looking at them). Some students will even be able to tell you what the objects smell like. Also, what generally happens is that after watching a classmate doing this and coming up with lots of words, other students want a go, too. So be sure to have two or three pairs of items with you.

For both of these activities, use the vocabulary generated for stories, descriptions, word games, etc. Note: activities triggering the senses help students with **dyslexia** memorise new words, too.

4. Work on memorizing vocabulary

When we write vocabulary on the board, or point it out in coursebooks, the shape of the word is transferred to a student's memory. For students with low vision, this is either more laborious or doesn't happen at all. You can compensate for this by incorporating as many memory and spelling games into your classes as possible. Poems, songs, tongue twisters, sketches incorporating the lexical set, word association games and invisible drills are all appropriate. Invisible drills are carried out by repeatedly indicating parts of the board as replacing lexical items, in a way that becomes a fun challenge-like chant. Pat or tap the board, rather than simply pointing, though, in order to provide sound clues.

Try a classic Spelling Bee team game, where you give teams words to define and spell; this works well with higher levels as well as lower ones. Remember that any work done to reinforce memorising vocabulary rather than writing it down will support learners with low vision.

5. Record, record, record

Blind students or students with low vision will benefit from having vocabulary lists audio-recorded so they can listen to them any time and anywhere. Make recordings of unit vocabulary each week or month and give the recordings to your students. Remember: it's better to record vocabulary in a context such as a sentence. You can also leave five to ten minutes at the end of a lesson for reviewing and recording vocabulary. Students work in small groups to try and remember all the words from the day or week, or to play a guessing game where they write definitions and the others try to guess the word. Then they voice-record the list onto their phones while their partner listens. (Listening to each other's voices also helps memorisation.) They can listen to the recordings in their free time to revise vocabulary.

The hard of hearing

A teacher of students who are profoundly deaf will need to be fluent in sign language, both in the target language and in their students' own language, and will also need specific training in teaching the deaf. However, many teachers who are not trained in this area will encounter individual students who are hard of hearing or who were born deaf but have cochlear implants (CIs) to assist their hearing. The likelihood of teaching students who are hard of hearing is increasing as the number of seniors (learners over 60) increases, so it is useful to be ready with a few techniques for teaching vocabulary in order to be able to fully support these students.

6. Remember the practicalities

The main thing to remember is your physical presentation. Learners who are hard of hearing rely on their eyes, so be sure never to have anything in front of your face when you say vocabulary items, and always face the front when you're speaking. Although learning to actually produce the spoken items may not be of interest to the more profoundly deaf, all deaf or hard of hearing students will want to learn to recognise what vocabulary items look like when spoken, as this facilitates lip-reading. One activity you can try, particularly if you have a hard of hearing student in a class of hearing students, is a game whereby you mouth the day's vocabulary for pairs to guess and write down. If you also then ask pairs to mouth words for each other to guess, you will train them to be aware of articulating words for lip-reading purposes too. This additionally helps with empathy and awareness.

7. Use flashcards

Flashcards are key teaching aids for supporting learners who are hard of hearing. The problem with referring to pictures in a coursebook is that it tends to be a heads-down activity, which detaches the experience of seeing the visual from that of seeing the word being produced. Using flashcards allows the teacher to have the image near their face when they say the word, thereby supporting lip-reading; it can also be either held near a wordcard (a card with a single word or phrase written on it) or stuck on the board next to the written form. In review lessons, you can use flashcards drawn by the students. The act of producing cards is motivating for students; it also reinforces associations, as the memory of drawing may trigger retrieval of the item.

8. Be aware of the relationship with language

Learners who were born deaf but have CIs, or those born hard of hearing, rarely confuse homophones (*right/write*) but they may confuse pairs of words that look similar, such as *like* and *kite*. This is because

they learn words much as Chinese words are learnt – as ‘pictures’ (logograms). Consequently, when you’re preparing vocabulary, flashcards, etc. you need to remember to see words as pictures, since pairs of visually similar words might need more spelling training. Items such as *shriek*, *groan* or *howl* are irrelevant to these students, and can be problematic, so are to be avoided. One game that can help is ‘Spot the odd one out’, which can also help deaf students focus on vocabulary ‘shape’ or spelling, too. Prepare trios of words, with one that is spelt differently but could be confused, e.g. *like*, *kite*, *bike* / *late*, *gate*, *tiger* / blue, label, due. Students identify the different word, and then use it in a sentence, to reinforce the association between form and meaning.

Dyslexic students

Students with dyslexia typically have difficulty with organising learning, reading, writing and short-term memory. Dyslexia affects individuals in different ways and to different degrees – some students will only be affected by mild dyslexia (which may go undiagnosed), while others may be more severely affected. Commonly, people with dyslexia struggle with reading and spelling, and many have problems with handwriting. Dyslexia is not classed as a disability; instead it is often referred to as a specific ‘learning difficulty’. However, despite being considered as a difficulty, it actually brings many advantages, including high levels of creativity, good global visual processing, and the ability to ‘think outside of the box’ to solve problems. It’s also worth noting that there isn’t one strategy that works well for everyone with dyslexia, so you’ll need to find out what works for each individual student.

9. Adapt coursebook materials

There are many activity types in coursebooks that cause problems for students with dyslexia. For example, scanning a text to find words is difficult if the words keep moving on the page. Another is matching words to definitions due difficulties with working memory. As an alternative, use direct instruction to teach new words, and present sentence-level contexts rather than large chunks of text. Make matching activities multi-modal through the use of cards that students can physically match together. Introduce words orally, then write them on the board and say them again before asking students to complete vocabulary exercises in the book. This will give students some contact with the word before having to deal with it in the text.

10. Use technology

Technology gives students with dyslexia a range of useful tools, including accessibility tools on computers and laptops, and assistive technology for web browsing. Here are some ways to use technological tools:

- Allow students to type (or dictate) their work and to use the spellchecker. Show them how to right-click on a misspelled word to find a list of possible spellings. An alternative is assistive technology such as *Ghotit*, which is especially designed to help people with dyslexia with their spelling.
- Use an online dictionary with audio so that students can both see and hear the word.
- Encourage students to use apps such as *Mental Note for iPad* to create a multi-sensory digital notebook which can include text (including speech-to-text functionality), audio, pictures & sketches.
- Upload worksheets into an app such as *SnapType Pro* so that students can complete them without having to write answers by hand.

For more information on useful apps, search for ‘dyslexia apps for adults’ in your web browser.

BONUS: Multilingual and teen students

Multilingual students – that is, anyone who speaks two languages or more to B2 (approx.) or higher. These students are constantly functioning in both/all their languages, at neurological level. If you use translation judiciously, you train the part of the brain that does this (the caudate nucleus) to select the correct ‘path’. If you use it with metaphorical language, you support the creation of memory. (Metaphorical language triggers the part of the brain responsible for the sense related to the word eg bitterly – taste).

Teens – teens brains are still developing so some activities are less effective eg ‘circle the correct word’. If you want vocabulary to be better stored and recalled, ask them to explain why options are wrong, as well as right. Get them to make a sentence with the “wrong” word in the pair, where it’s correct.

- Empathy training activities are great for helping develop the social brain (limbic system). The emotions lip-reading activity is particularly good, as pairwork is better than group, at this age. Also the photos for what/where/how/why words-to-stories.
- The Reward centre is euphoric in teen brains, but the impulse control button and rational-thinking centre are still works-in-progress. Resist the urge to Not Be Fun: teens need games, engagement, & relevance more than other age group. Fun is not the same as engagement, true, but games are the easiest way to trigger the sense of reward. That and helping them to be successful.

These ideas and many MANY more tips (490 more, in fact) on teaching vocabulary, can be found in *ETpedia Vocabulary* (Pavilion ELT) which is out TODAY.

Visit <https://www.pavpub.com/pavilion-elt> for more information.

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