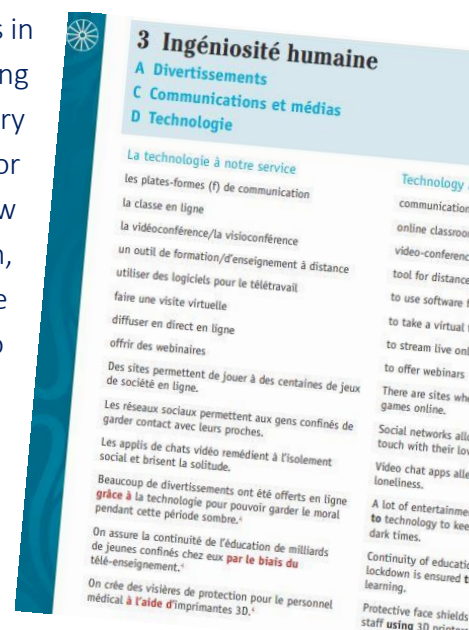


Making the Most of a Vocabulary Book

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In my role of tutor of French, I am consistently asked by post-16 students in one-to-one sessions, for help with “learning vocabulary” and “making correct sentences”. Some are at a loss when the advice to learn vocabulary by reading extensively or using technology does not work for them. For many, the exposure to texts and the opportunities to manipulate new language feel insufficient. I must say, with my course book writer’s hat on, that I have too often been painfully aware of how much content we expose learners to and how few opportunities we provide for them to manipulate and recycle that content. I would like to explore here whether there is a case for making more systematic use of a tool such as a vocabulary book in class, in order to support vocabulary retention. Research shows that vocabulary knowledge and performance in a language are intimately linked. It also shows that intentional learning through bilingual lists can lead to better recall¹.



From the feedback I got from A Level and IB tutees, vocabulary work is often something they are left to do independently, and some really struggle with it. They also complain about not being able to use the vocabulary they manage to retain into grammatically and syntactically correct sentences when writing essays.

From a survey I recently carried out on several online teachers’ fora, it appears that if some rote-learning is expected from students (through apps such as Quizlet), bilingual vocabulary books are rarely actively used in the classroom. Paul Nation’s research into vocabulary acquisition indicates that they are useful tools. He says in a special issue of *The Language Teacher*: “Forget all the criticism you have heard about rote learning and translation; research has repeatedly shown that such learning is very effective”.²

When compiling a recent vocabulary book for IB students, I thought it important to address the issues that learners raise and provide them with a resource that would not only offer a good selection of core language linked to the themes studied in class, as was currently available, but one which would go beyond a mere topic-by-topic list of words and phrases, one

which would help with grammar and syntax by modelling specific features through sentences. (The hardest part of writing that book was selecting from the huge collection of items I had gathered from reading up-to-date texts from various sources!)

I divided each topic-based section into subsections and would strongly encourage students to do the same when compiling their own lists:

- core and high frequency words and phrases (often noun-noun or noun-adjective collocations, and synonyms)
- verb collocations
- simple sentences
- complex sentences with specific linguistic features which can be used across topics, such as sentence starters, specific grammar points, etc.

I thought it might be of interest to go one step further and think of practical suggestions for how students could maximise the use of their vocabulary book, vocabulary lists or resources, at home and in class to help with vocabulary retention.

I made a list of tasks which require no technology and no preparation from teachers (students are the ones doing the work – and rightly so!). These tasks also aim to:

- create opportunities to constantly revisit the book or lists, allowing for greater recycling which is crucial to retention, and this in the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking
- increase exposure to and manipulation of language through meaningful chunks or complete sentences, rather than individual words
- develop students' awareness of specific linguistic features (lexical or grammatical) which can be used across topics
- encourage fluency development by reusing known language and multiplying the opportunities to increase speed of retrieval
- involve students in the making of the tasks, which they prepare independently at home. By doing so, it engages them in their own vocabulary learning as they are required to make decisions about language (e.g. inserting errors). It also increases their exposure to the language and gives them a vested interest when the task is then performed in class. Paul Nation stresses that we need to encourage learner autonomy: "Encourage students to take informed responsibility for their own vocabulary learning. If students know what vocabulary to learn and how to learn it, their learning can be much more effective than if they are reliant on teacher prepared exercises and material. Students also need to be motivated and encouraged to make their own vocabulary learning decisions." ¹

Although the suggestions that follow are illustrated with extracts in French from the vocabulary book which I recently developed ³, they can be adapted to any vocabulary lists, with model sentences.

1 / ZAPPING *Switch over!*

AT HOME students learn a section of the book which you have selected in order to prepare for work on a new topic or to recycle a topic previously visited.

IN CLASS, divide the class into two teams. Each team plays for X minutes then you switch over to the other team.

Start with team A: you read out words/phrases/sentences from the book section in French and students translate them into English. Stop after e.g. 5 minutes and note the number of correct translations and give points. Keep a note of which sentences were not translated correctly.

Then switch over to Team B: read out the same words/phrases/sentences but this time, students translate them into French (team B will do well to listen to what you say with Team A!). Stop after the same amount of time and note the number of correct translations given.

Read the words/phrases/sentences that were not translated correctly and students from both teams can race to translate them to increase their score.

This can be played differently, with switching from one team to the other each time a word/phrase/sentence is translated incorrectly.

2 / L'IMPOSTEUR *Interloper*

AT HOME: ask students to study a specific section in the book, ideally on a theme you would like to revisit. They then write down sentences from that section, changing one element in each.

IN CLASS: students read out their sentence and the class (in teams) spot the difference from memory.

e.g topic: *L'identité culturelle: la francophonie*

Le français est valorisé aux dépens des langues maternelles et cela crée du ressentiment.

Students write → *Le français est valorisé aux dépens des langues maternelles et cela crée de bons sentiments.*

Class finds the *imposteur* (*de bons sentiments*) and provides a replacement.

3 / TOILETTAGE DE PHRASES *Sentence grooming*

AT HOME students review specific pages of the book which you have selected from any topic previously covered. They then take or make up a few sentences using language from those pages inserting one error in each sentence. They could focus on specific grammar features, like pronouns or tenses, the use of connectors, etc.

IN CLASS students write their sentences for the class to see. Students (in teams) then spot and correct the errors.

e.g. topic: *L'importance de l'éducation*

A student writes → *Il est crucial que tout le monde peut recevoir une éducation de qualité, surtout les personnes les plus défavorisées.*

Class finds the error and corrects it (peut is incorrect, it has to be the subjunctive puisse)

e.g. topic : *Le choix d'un métier*

The student writes → *Je voudrais gagner ma vie en faisant un métier utile aux autres et gratifiant pour moi ; par conséquent, je voudrais travailler près de chez moi pour limiter les déplacements.*

Class finds the connector is wrong and suggests another (par conséquent should change to qui plus est or synonym)

4 / FOIRE AUX QUESTIONS FAQ

AT HOME students create questions which correspond to a selection of phrases or sentences from the section of the book you have asked them to look at.

IN CLASS students ask their questions. The class provide answers, adjusting the model sentences from the book as needed.

e.g. topic: *Les avantages d'une société diverse*

Je suis d'avis que s'intégrer à la société du pays dans lequel on vit ne doit pas impliquer oublier ses origines étrangères.

Possible question on that sentence → *Faut-il s'intégrer à tout prix /oublier ses origines quand on s'installe dans un nouveau pays ?*

5 / SUITE LOGIQUE Follow-up

IN CLASS (work on collocations) select phrases/ sentences from sections of the book with which students are already familiar. Read out the beginning of the phrase/sentence and ask them to say or write (using whiteboards) what they think will follow. Accept all possibilities that make sense.

e.g. topic: *Les communautés expatriées*

You say: avoir le mal	students say : e.g. → <i>du pays</i>
les citadins aiment faire un retour	→ <i>aux sources</i>
on se sent déraciné et on perd	<i>indent</i> → <i>ses repères</i>

6 / BOUCHE-TROU Stopgap

AT HOME select a couple of sections for students to work on. They then create sentences using the vocabulary from those sections, gapping a word or two in each sentence.

IN CLASS students read out their sentences. The class divided into groups write what they think the missing words are. The group with the greatest number of correct answers wins. Accept any option that makes sense.

e.g. topic: *Vacances/ Voyages*

On préfère profiter [?] des vacances pour se détendre et se la couler [?] à la maison.

Possible answer → *pleinement* or *à fond* and *douce* (idiom)

7 AU SUIVANT! *Next!*

AT HOME students work on a section of the book, preferably on a theme which needs revisiting.

IN CLASS divide the class into two teams. The aim is to make sentences that are relevant to the topic, using the vocabulary revised. A student from team A says the first word, a student from team B must then follow with another word, then back to team A for a third word, and so on until a whole sentence is made. The team with the last word wins (this encourages students to make extended sentences)

e.g. topic : *Les avantages d'un monde connecté*

team A : *L'internet* → team B : *permet* → team A : *de* → team B : *travailler* → team A : *à* → team B : *domicile* → team A : *et* → team B : *de* → team A : *communiquer* → team B : *avec* → team A : *ses* → team B : *amis* → team A : *et* → team B : *sa* → team A : *famille*.

8 PHRASES AUX ENCHERES *Sentence Auction*

AT HOME (working on rephrasing and using synonyms) students have to rephrase as much as possible a selection of sentences you select for them. A useful [site](#) for finding French synonyms/antonyms. This is great activity to practise registers for instance.

IN CLASS students share their sentences (orally or in writing) and, in groups, bid for sentences they think are good or which they can improve, the aim being to “collect” as many correct sentences as possible.

e.g. topic: *La vie politique*

La politique, moi, je m'en fiche complètement (*fam.*)

Possible rephrasing → *Personnellement, je ne m'intéresse absolument pas à la politique.*

9 SOLEIL DE PHRASES *Sun sentences*

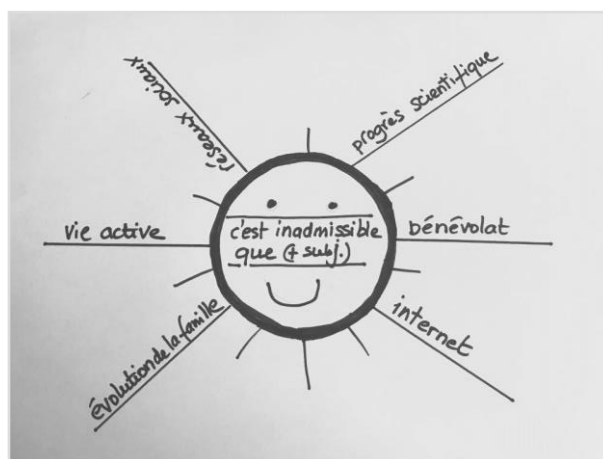
AT HOME students revise a selection of phrases from the list of “show off” or “wow” phrases. These are phrases/expressions which are transferable across topics, such as sentence starters, opinion phrases, or special advanced grammatical features.

(They are modelled in sentences throughout the vocabulary book I compiled. They could be equally useful to A level and IB Diploma students of French and a list is free to downloadable [here](#).

IN CLASS draw a sun on the board (the number of rays corresponds to the number of topics you want covered). Students in pairs or groups write a sentence for each of the rays using the “show off” phrase you wrote in the centre of the sun.

e.g. C'est inadmissible que l'on puisse envisager le clonage humain. / C'est inadmissible que tant de gens doivent compter sur l'action de bénévoles pour se nourrir. etc.

Language functions	Transferable language	Page number ¹ (A-2 for French B)
giving your point of view	• personnellement/en ce qui me concerne/quant à moi	20
	• je suis d'avis que/je soutiens que/je suis absolument persuadé(e) que/je ne peux m'empêcher de penser que	34
	• ce qui me semble être/ce qui me paraît/ce que je trouve	58
	giving a negative opinion:	
	• c'est honteux/une honte/c'est scandaleux/c'est un scandale	83
	• je suis indigné(e) que + <i>subjunctive</i> /je suis outré(e) que + <i>subjunctive</i>	83
giving a positive opinion:	• c'est intolérable/inadmissible/inacceptable/insupportable que + <i>subjunctive</i>	83
	• être favorable à/être en faveur de/avoir une préférence pour	60
	• certains/d'autres/d'autres encore	6
	• on dit que/on entend/certains affirment que/selon un grand nombre de gens/à en croire certains	27
saying what others say/think	• tout le monde s'accorde à penser que/il est généralement admis que	42
	• les défenseurs de x affirment que ... /les partisans de x font valoir que ...	84
	• les opposants à x critiquent .../une des cibles principales des critiques/ selon les détracteurs	85



10 BREVE DE COMPTOIR *Off the cuff!*

AT HOME divide students in pairs and give each pair a different topic from the book to revise at home. Ask pairs to prepare a conversation using the vocabulary they revised: they must ideally try and avoid making the topic too obvious as the conversations in class will be timed and the pair able to perform the longest conversation will win!

IN CLASS ask one pair to hold their conversation: the rest of the class eavesdrop and work out which topic they think is being discussed. They write it on their whiteboards and show their answers. If they are correct, the conversation stops. (You could list the selected topics on the board. for support).

e.g. topic: *L'importance de l'éducation*

A : *Selon moi, c'est une des clés de la réussite.*

B : *C'est vrai, ça forge le caractère !*

A : *Effectivement, et ça permet de développer ses compétences.*

A : *Tout à fait d'accord, c'est pour cela qu'il faut lutter contre l'échec scolaire.*

B : *Oui, et c'est essentiel de faire reculer l'analphabétisme dans certains pays.*

I hope that these few suggestions may prove helpful to students who struggle with remembering vocabulary from word lists, by engaging them and providing them with ways to boost their recall through meaningful fun.

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References

For a useful list of research papers linked to vocabulary acquisition click [here](#)

The Language Teacher July, 2005/ Volume 29/number 7 – ISSN 0289-7938
(The Japan Association for Language Teaching)

A-Z French for Language B by Danièle Bourdais a Free downloads [here](#)

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“Vocabulary related to coronavirus and its impact” + translation worksheet and model answers

“Show-off phrases for IBDP French B” + worksheet and model answers

