

If you are worried about vocabulary ...

1 keep a good record of new language you meet in class

Do you have a notebook that you write new language in? Do you bring it to class every day? Do you copy what your teacher writes on the board? This is the absolute minimum you need to do. Maybe sometimes you look at the board and think you know the words, but can you use them? You need to record whole examples and sentences and spend some time revising them. You might also want to look back through your old vocabulary notes and organise them in new ways. For example, you may decide to make a new page listing all the **time expressions** you've met – *over the last few months, nowadays, when I was a kid, in a few months' time*, and so on.

The *Outcomes* online interactive Vocabulary Builder is a great resource you can use to improve your vocabulary (go to <http://www.eltoutcomes.com/vocabulary-builder>). Here you can make your own wordlists and annotate them, add translations, print them out and learn them, etc.

2 try to learn collocations and words in context

It's very important to learn **collocations** (words that go together). Note the noun that goes with an adjective, the verb that's used with a noun or adverb. Even words you think you already 'know' will have lots of new collocations that are often used with them. Of course you know the word *problem*. But do you know *key problems* or *pressing problems*? Or that you can *address a problem*? Learning to do more with words you already know is at least as important as learning lots of new words! Invest in a good collocation dictionary to help you with this.

Make sure you learn words in context. Context is very important. For example, the opposite of *a strong accent* is not a *weak accent* but a *slight accent*. Change the context and the opposite might change: the opposite of *strong winds*, for instance, is a *light breeze*.

3 remember that vocabulary is more than just single words

It's easy to think that improving your vocabulary just means learning new words – or collocations. However, there are thousands and thousands of **multi-word vocabulary items** that are also important to learn. These may be made up of several words that you already know, but when used together they take on new meanings. When you translate them into your own language, you might just use one word to express these ideas. For example, in English we say to *make the most of your time*. In Spanish, one word expresses this idea: *aprovechar su tiempo*.

4 be careful how you use translation

Comparing English to your own first language is normal and natural, and it can be very useful. However, DON'T translate single words. The translation of a word is totally dependent on context. Take the word *rough*, for example. If you look it up in a bilingual

dictionary, it may give you a one-word translation. However, look at these examples: *If you're not sure, **have a rough guess**. I think I'm getting a cold. I feel really rough. It was a horrible journey. The sea was really rough. It's quite a rough area. I wouldn't walk around there at night.*

When you translate the words in ***bold italics*** into your language, you probably use a different word for *rough* in each sentence. So it's best to translate words together, or in whole sentences. When you note language, write the English phrases or sentences in one column, and the translation in another column. Add to it every day. Then cover the English, look at the phrase in your own language and see if you can remember the *exact* English translation.

5 develop revision strategies

You need to regularly look back at words you've met, and revise them to help you remember them. You might want to make cards to help you revise. Write the new word / collocation / multi-word item on one side of the card – and perhaps add an example – and then write a translation on the other side. Test yourself on your way to school or university – or on your way home. And then revise the same words again a week or so later.

6 get a good learner's dictionary and pay attention to pronunciation

When you learn a new word, look up and note the pronunciation too. Any good learner's dictionary will give the phonetic symbols that show you how to say the word. If you don't know these symbols already, learn them! Practise saying the new word – on its own and with other words it goes with. Try whole sentences, too, and pay attention to the way words join together, the linking sounds, the sounds which you don't say in normal-speed speech – and weak forms of words like *am, is, are, have, to* and so on. If you have CDs that go with books, you can play certain sentences and then practise saying them in the same way.

7 learn more language!

The more words you know, the easier it is to listen to English, to read English – and to speak English! If you still want to do more to boost your vocabulary, try one of these self-study books:

English Vocabulary Organiser – Chris Gough (Heinle Cengage)

Key Words for Fluency – George Woolard (Heinle Cengage – available at Pre-intermediate, Intermediate and Upper-intermediate levels)