
HEADS UP! AND COLLABORATIVE SENTENCE WRITING

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Abstract

The author describes two instructional strategies that strengthen students' understanding of key vocabulary.

Keywords: vocabulary instruction, vocabulary games

I'm always on the lookout for new activities to encourage students to learn and use new vocabulary that we study in class. With all the temptations of generative artificial intelligence, I've also needed to figure out ways to motivate students to write their own sentences with their own ideas. A couple of vocabulary activities I have used in my class recently are a version of Heads Up! and Collaborative Sentence Writing.

I first played Heads Up!, a game of giving clues and guessing words or phrases, with my game-loving family. We used the app version on a cellphone where the guessers held the phone facing outward on their foreheads. The answer that the guesser needed to come up with showed on the screen. We had laughing fits as we all shouted clues to the guesser.

In need of a different vocabulary review activity, I decided to adapt this game to my classroom. This activity works with partners or small groups. I make cards with vocabulary words and stack the cards into a pile, with the words face down. To play, one person draws a card (no peeking!) and puts the card up to their forehead, with the word facing out. Their partner or group members give clues. If the guesser can't get the word, they can pass and choose a new word.

Students are engaged and come up with all kinds of clues to get the guessers to know the words: synonyms, examples, and even (gasp!) grammatical information (e.g., "noun" or "it's an action").

A Spanish professor I shared this idea with adapted the activity as a competition. She gave a specific amount of time for each round, and teams competed to see how many vocabulary words they could guess correctly in each round. The teams played several rounds, earning points for each correct word. The team with the most points at the end of the rounds won.

A less lively but still engaging activity that promotes using vocabulary words in context is to have partners or small groups write collaborative sentences. Collaborative Sentence Writing forces (ha!) students to create original sentences as they discuss meanings and ideas with others. Students learn from each other through their discussions. I enjoy eavesdropping on students as they discuss their ideas and negotiate how to use the words.

Again, students can work in pairs or small groups. I assign the words for each pair or group. They write their sentences on papers to show on a doc cam or on the white board at the front of class. As a whole class, we can discuss and review the sentences.

For a more advanced activity, I give 5-10 vocabulary words, and students must write a paragraph that incorporates all the words. Students come up with themes for the paragraphs that are

often very different contexts from the original readings where the vocabulary words are from. I've used this activity as an assessment tool as well as a vocabulary review.

Author Biography

Rebecca Kastendick is an Adjunct Professor in the English for Academic Purposes program at Johnson County Community College, which means that she teaches English reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills to non-native speakers of English. She earned her M.A. in English with a specialization in Teaching English as a Second Language from Iowa State University many years ago. In addition to teaching, Rebecca loves to travel, experience different cultures, and meet new friends. So far, she has visited 19 countries. Twice, she has taught English in China. In 2024, she plans to visit the Netherlands, Switzerland, and South Korea. She can be reached at rkastend@jccc.edu.