

The Vocabulary Wheel: A Low-Resource Activity for Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention

by ANESTIN LUM CHI

LEVEL: Upper Beginner and above

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 20 minutes to design and create the vocabulary wheel; length of time for follow-up activities varies.

GOALS: To expand learners' vocabulary repertoire; to help them recycle vocabulary in a fun, learner-centered way.

MATERIALS: For each topic-specific vocabulary wheel, learners need two pieces of cardboard paper (or regular paper, where cardboard paper is unavailable), bold markers or pens, a pair of scissors, and something to fasten the two pieces of paper together, such as push pins, staples, or glue.

BACKGROUND: Vocabulary constitutes the backbone of a language because words are used to convey meaning. Typically, the more words people know, the better they are able to express their thoughts and feelings, both verbally and in writing. It is with this understanding that I developed the "vocabulary wheel" activity. A unique strength of the vocabulary wheel is that it appeals to both visual and kinesthetic learners.

In this article, I explain what the vocabulary wheel is, how it is designed, and how it can be adapted and used in different contexts. I define the vocabulary wheel as a word mat designed in the form of a clock or wheel, with words and/or expressions related to a given topic. It is usually made with two pieces of cardboard paper—one placed over the

other, with a pin or a staple or glue used as an anchor point holding them together in the middle. Figure 1 shows a vocabulary wheel I designed with my learners on the topic of climate change.

PREPARATION

At the beginning of a new topic or unit, identify new and/or difficult words and expressions related to the topic under study. These words and expressions will serve as the content for the vocabulary wheels.

You should also prepare the materials for the activity. Each group of learners (usually about four to six per group) should have two pieces of cardboard paper; a fastener such as a push pin, a staple, or glue; and access to pens (or markers) and a pair of scissors. Depending on availability, groups might have to share these items, although each group must have its own pieces of paper.



Figure 1. Vocabulary wheel on the topic of climate change (for upper-intermediate students)

A unique strength of the vocabulary wheel is that it appeals to both visual and kinesthetic learners.

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Introduce the topic and pre-teach unfamiliar words and expressions.

Teach the words and expressions you have prepared. Make sure learners understand how they relate to the overall topic. You might choose to ask learners what they already know about the topic, what personal experience they have with it, and how they think it might be important to them. This is a way to activate their prior knowledge and help them engage with the topic.

Step 2: Form groups and review the vocabulary.

Put learners in groups of four to six (you might increase the number depending on the size of your class) and ask them to do a recap of the words and expressions they have just learned. One way of doing the recap is to ask students to write the new words and expressions they remember from the topic. (They could even do this as a competition: put learners in two or more lines and have them take turns writing a word/expression on the board. The group with the longest list wins.)

Step 3: Design topic-specific vocabulary wheels.

When the recap is done, provide each group with two pieces of cardboard paper and make sure every group has a way to fasten their wheels together and access to a pair of scissors and to markers or pens.

Thereafter, explain the design process and guide learners. On the first piece of cardboard, they draw two circles: a smaller circle in the middle and a larger circle around it. You might have to model an example or draw two circles on the board so that the groups can see the appropriate sizes of the two circles they will draw.

In the inner circle, students write the overall topic or theme (for example, “climate change”). In the larger outer circle, they write words and expressions from the recap list. They must partition the piece of cardboard neatly, according to the number of words and expressions they have chosen. Note that they might not be able to include all the new words and expressions; as Figure 1 shows, eight is a good number of terms to use with lower-level learners, while more-advanced learners could make wheels with a larger number of terms.

When they are done with the first piece of cardboard, students place it aside and take the second piece. They draw circles and partition this piece of cardboard in the same way they did on the first. In the inner circle, they write the overall topic or theme. In the outer circle, depending on the instructions you give and the targeted objectives of the lesson, they write the definitions of the words and expressions, or they write collocations, synonyms, or antonyms. It is best if groups do not mix these up, especially at more-basic learning levels; in other words, if they are writing synonyms, they should write a synonym for each word on their wheel, not a synonym for one word, an antonym for another word, a collocation for the next word, and so on.

At the group level, verify that the meanings, collocations, synonyms, or antonyms (as the case may be) learners have for the terms on the recap list are correct before they write these on the cardboard.

Note that you could vary instructions for different groups, such that every group does not write the exact same thing on their wheel for the bottom layer. For example, you might ask one group to write collocations, another to write definitions, a third to write antonyms, and so on.

It is helpful for learners to create both blank pieces at the same time and make them identical so that they align correctly.

Learners can also be encouraged to create a fully individualized wheel if their proficiency level allows. I do this often with advanced learners, and I also encourage them to look up meanings, collocations, synonyms, and/or antonyms in a dictionary. This is a way of developing their dictionary search skills and making them autonomous learners.

It is helpful for learners to create both blank pieces at the same time and make them identical so that they align correctly. Note that the top layer is cut along the partition/segment lines, from the outer ring edge to the inner circle's outer edge, creating flaps that can be lifted. The bottom layer is not cut.

When learners are done designing both pieces of cardboard, ask them to cut out the wheels neatly (using scissors), following the lines of the outer circles and the word partitions. Next, ask them to place the first piece (with the words and/or expressions on it) over the second (with the meanings, collocations, synonyms, or antonyms on it) and pin, staple, or glue them together at the center. They need to ensure that the pieces of cardboard are cut neatly, according to the partitioned expressions, so that the pieces can be lifted to read the meanings, collocations, synonyms, or antonyms (depending on the instructions and goals of the lessons) on the cardboard beneath.

Step 4: Recycle and review the vocabulary on the wheels.

Given that recycling is useful for remembering, get learners to recycle the vocabulary on the wheel by playing a game, or engage learners in an activity that requires them to be communicative and to use the vocabulary items in context.

Playing a game will work best in a small classroom and with small groups of learners. If you decide to play a game, first post the

topic-specific vocabulary wheel on the wall of your classroom. Next, put learners into groups and explain the rules of the game: A group strikes a given word or expression on the wheel with the help of a pin; other groups give the meaning, collocation, synonym, or antonym of the word or expression (depending on the instruction given and the content of the vocabulary wheel). Groups verify by lifting up the flaps on the first wheel to read what is written on the cardboard beneath it. Groups take turns to strike and provide answers.

As an option, and if it is appropriate for your teaching context and your learners, you can make the game competitive by attributing a point when a group gets the correct answer; the group with the highest number of points wins.

Another variation of the game—if the wheels are held together with a pin rather than with glue or a staple—is to get learners to spin the top wheel, then open one of the flaps and say whether the definition/collocation/synonym/antonym on the bottom wheel matches the word or expression on the top wheel.

VARIATIONS: ADAPTING TO CONTEXT AND LEVELS

The design described in this article is for a low-resource context, where cardboard paper is readily available.

In a context where this kind of paper is not available, teachers can support learners to design topic-specific vocabulary wheels in their notebooks. Teachers can suggest that learners get a separate book just for vocabulary development so that they can do the paper cutting without having to destroy relevant course notes. This becomes a kind of mobile dictionary, which they can easily flip through as they review.

Learners get repeated exposure and practice through creating the wheels, playing games in groups, and even using the wheels individually for review.

In high-tech contexts, the vocabulary wheel can be designed and played using online wheel games such as Wordwall. Use vocabulary wheels to review words and expressions with learners.

For young learners, teachers will need to pre-teach vocabulary and guide learners to design vocabulary wheels that reflect their proficiency level—using basic words or expressions.

For advanced learners, teachers can extend the activity to cover other language elements, such as phrasal verbs and idioms. To do this, learners can be encouraged to use dictionaries or guided to use corpora. See Figure 2 for a vocabulary wheel with gender collocations that I designed with my learners.

Also, teachers might ask learners to design vocabulary wheels as homework.

in this article, learners recycle topic-related vocabulary items and unconsciously assimilate their meaning and use. Learners get repeated exposure and practice through creating the wheels, playing games in groups, and even using the wheels individually for review.

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Photos by Anestin Lum Chi

CONCLUSION

By designing topic-specific vocabulary wheels, learners become familiar with new words and expressions, and they expand their vocabulary repertoire. By using vocabulary wheels and/or playing the game described

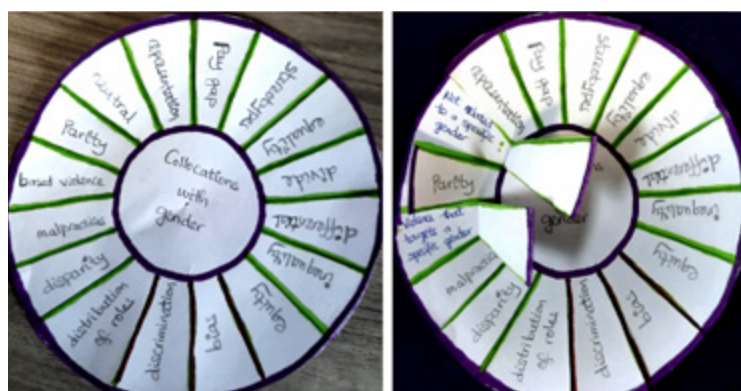


Figure 2. Vocabulary wheel on the topic of gender (for upper-intermediate learners)