

Focusing on the verb lexicon: Why and how to teach a verb vocabulary.

1 Introducing the idea of learning a verb lexicon.

Robust knowledge of verb *vocabulary* is absolutely critical for learning a language. That is, the meaning of verbs – ‘go’, ‘eat’, ‘be’, ‘play’, ‘love’ – not the grammar of verbs in their different tenses and forms. It would be useful to explain this to students. It is something that we take for granted in our own language.

Students in year 7 should all know what a verb is, from their primary school lessons. It might, however, be worth checking this in the initial stages.

Remember – verbs are NOT just action words! They can mean things that we can't see or hear, such as 'be', 'have', 'want', 'get', 'become', or 'happen'.

In English, you can add 'ed' or 'ing' to the end of them, and put 'to' in front of them. They can have words like 'was', 'is', or 'has' in front of them, but that doesn't change their actual meaning.

Work with the class to see whether students can spot the **verb or verbs** in the following:

1. George plays computer games every day for three hours. [play]
2. Helen loves detective stories. [love]
3. Everyone thinks that it is great. [think; be]
4. He never really likes fizzy drinks. [like]
5. The climate is getting warmer. [get]
6. If the match had been more exciting, the players would have been happier. [be; be]
7. Are you becoming a bore? [become]
8. What kind of taste do you detect? [detect]
9. The fish was eaten by the shark. [eat]
10. Making myself do sport is my ambition this year! [make; do; is]

To go further you could ask students to:

- tell you what the 'infinitive', the dictionary form, of each verb is in English (shown in square brackets above).
- change the 'dictionary' form into as many different versions of the same **verb** as they can, *without turning it into a different word class* (part of speech)! E.g.,
 - think, thinks, thinking, thought are all forms of the same verb.
 - thoughtful, thoughtless, thinker are NOT verbs, but they come from the same word family.
- give you some words that can be both a noun and a verb (e.g., head; captain; chair; cook).

2 Why are verbs so important?

- Without understanding verbs, learners can't work out how two nouns relate to each other (e.g, The girl "???" French – could be hates, loves, studies, speaks).
- Without productive knowledge of a verb, learners cannot create their own sentences. Research has shown that learners in year 9 and 10 can still produce 'verbless utterances' as they don't have a bank of verbs that they can rely on when under pressure during oral communication.
- Analysis of textbooks and observations has shown that language lessons (everywhere) tend to focus on teaching nouns, adjectives and adverbs; verbs, as *lexical items*, tend to get forgotten.
- Rote-learned, fixed phrases ('Je ne comprends pas ...') can be useful, but an over-reliance on them doesn't help learners to 'analyse' them and find out which parts can work in new contexts. We need to help learners identify and isolate verbs in the input that they hear and read.
- There is good evidence that the more verb vocabulary learners know, the more likely they are to learn grammar. Knowing a verb lexicon gives learners 'hooks' onto which they can peg the grammar, such as different verb endings. They can then also 'strip out' the endings, and find the core verb meaning.
- Knowing that different versions of verbs have the same core meaning is really important. So, the verb resource slides (search '25 most common verbs' and '15 high-frequency prototype verbs') aim to help learners know that different forms of a verb word are related (e.g., 'veut' is the same meaning as 'vouloir').

3 Which verbs should we focus on?

NCELP is providing a suggested sequence of verbs, based on:

- a) the verbs that are the most highly frequently used in the language (the '25 most common' verbs, according to a carefully selected word frequency list,
- b) frequent and regular verbs that depict actions ('15 high-frequency prototype verbs').

4 Which verb forms should we focus on?

- We have chosen at the start to introduce **two** forms. This decision aims to focus learners on the **meaning** of the verb, rather than the complex changes verb forms can undergo.
- The **infinitive** is clearly useful in many contexts and it is essential learners recognise its form, especially for highly irregular verbs. It is also a building block for dictionary use.
- The **3rd person singular** is sometimes considered to be the "default short form". Research has found that learners find this form very useful when they don't yet have a full grammar system in place.
- This default short form provides a very useful "core" that can then, at later stages, be manipulated (e.g., for 1st and 2nd person singular).
- In addition, it is a highly frequent form as it is used with a wide range of subjects: he, she, it, full nouns.

- Furthermore, 3rd person singular is useful for the French 'on' and so also expresses first person plurality; and for French, Spanish and German, the impersonal meanings of 'on', 'se', and 'man'.
- There tends to be strong emphasis on 1st person singular in current teaching, so this approach will ensure 3rd person is not neglected.

A note on using these slides

Please note, these slides are only for the very initial stage of presentation. Much more practice is needed, to recognise them in listening and in reading, and to produce them in speech and writing, actively recalling them in meaningful contexts. They will need to be revisited regularly and often.