

TEACHING TIPS

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Teaching Tip 9: Dealing with Vocabulary Queries TEFL.NET/EnglishClub.com

How to avoid doing it:

1. Get the students to read the exercise completely before starting to actually do anything. They can underline the words they don't know, or (more positively) underline the words they *do* know.
2. When a student asks you to explain the meaning of a word, don't. Ask the other students if anyone can explain it.
3. You could put the students in pairs or small groups and get them to explain the words they don't know to each other. This sounds daft but it's quite logical really - the words Gianni is having difficulty with won't necessarily be the same ones that Marco is struggling with. (Beware of the students' tendency to translate the words. See TT 17 for info on Translating).
4. It's a good idea to get the students to try to guess the meaning of the word from the context it's in. (See TT6 for further information on 'deducing meaning from context').
5. Get the students to look the word up in a (preferably English to English a.k.a. monolingual) dictionary, should such a thing be available (see TT20 for further information about dictionaries).

Why to avoid doing it:

1. You are not a dictionary. You don't even look like one, do you?.
2. There's a world of difference between telling someone something (spoon-feeding students who soon get into the habit of switching off, being passive, letting the teacher do all the work for them and not bothering to try to remember a single thing) and teaching someone something (creating an environment and a set of circumstances in which someone can actively learn, practise new skills, and develop confidence in his/her own abilities).
3. One day, out there in the big wide world, the students will be faced with situations in which they will not know all the words and you won't be there to help them. Then what will they do? (With any luck they will be able to fall back on all the useful skills you've taught them in class).

Explaining new vocabulary

As a last resort, give the students an explanation of the new word or phrase in English. It's a good idea to give them an example sentence or two containing the word or phrase so that they can see how to use it. You may find it useful to demonstrate or mime the word to convey its meaning quickly. Or maybe a quick line-drawing (of the 'stick-man' type) would convey the meaning more quickly? Sometimes a synonym (similar word) is useful (e.g. wealthy = rich) or an opposite (e.g. wealthy = the opposite of poor).

Extra info:

If a student still thinks I should explain all the new words to him I refuse and explain like this:

If you give a starving man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach him *how* to fish he can feed himself for life. (I explain 'starving' as 'very, very, very hungry').

In this case the 'fish' is the explanation of a word, given by you. The 'how to fish' is the ability to guess words from context, the confidence to ask a peer (a classmate, a colleague etc.) if they know the meaning, and the ability to use a dictionary.