



English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)
Module 3: Task 2 – 4 Articles
Article 3.1: Helping Students with English Vocabulary

When it comes to EMI and vocabulary, there are different strategies we can try in order to help students with words they don't know. Keep in mind that you will need to use many of these together, not just one strategy alone.

Ten strategies for helping students with vocabulary:

1. **Plan ahead.** Make a list of words you think students will need help with, and plan how you will support them.
2. **Explain words in context, not in isolated lists.** For example, you can stop a lecture/discussion to explain or define a word. You can do this using a definition or paraphrase in English, using gestures or even pictures/drawings to explain the word, or if necessary and appropriate, using your first language to explain or define it. Keep in mind, though, that you will want to work with your students to decide how much of your native language they want to use in your EMI course. Some students want only or nearly only English, and if you have students from multiple language backgrounds, you might need to only use English in order to be the most fair.
3. **Use visuals.** Put unknown words on the screen or board so that students can see the spelling and hear you pronounce them. In your slides, you can bold key terms for them.
4. **Use your intuition and experience to help you decide when you will define/explain words.** Sometimes you might want to use a potentially unknown word that you didn't think of before, so you didn't explain to students already. In this case, just stop at that moment and define or explain the word, writing it on the board/screen if possible (Moriyasu, 2017).
5. **Use small group discussions.** Even with large classes, breaking students into smaller groups allows them to help each other with concepts or words or to keep them engaged in class. Small group discussions can help students by engaging them in the content so they are not just passive listeners, giving them opportunities to work with each other to figure out content, and allowing the instructor to talk with smaller groups of students and explain words or concepts that they missed during the lecture. During the discussions, encourage students to use the new words they are learning and not worry about making mistakes. This will help them remember the words long-term (Moriyasu, 2017).
6. **Re-use key words during class.** Each time you say the word, write it down on the board if possible, and reiterate meanings of key terms at the end of class time.



7. **Create a glossary of key terms for your students.** This can be put online in your course management system, if you use one. Or you can create a Google Doc or Google Spreadsheet. Of course, students can write them in notebooks as well. You can ask students to add to the glossary or word list with words they find useful.

8. **Explain new words in different ways.** You can show a picture of the word, give its definition, give a similar word, give an example, describe the word or concept, demonstrate something related to the word, or relate the word to a similar form they might already know. For example, if you are describing the word “longitudinal,” you can ask students if they see any words they recognize. They may notice “long,” which can help you further explain the meaning of “longitudinal.”



"[African student studying at dormitory from tablet computer](#)" by [Tinsae Belay](#) is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)

9. **Prepare students for words they will need to know for any assignments or assessments.** If you have a test question that asks students to sequence steps, for example, they will need to fully understand the meaning of the word “sequence.” Or, if you ask students to “compare and contrast” two concepts, they will need to have practiced comparing and contrasting during class and will need to understand what you expect to see in their answers.

10. **Use technology before or during class to help students with unknown words.** For technical terms, you can access tools such as [Vocabulary.com](#), which provides lists of useful terms by specific fields. Some tools also provide quizzes with words. For example, [Vocabulary.com](#) can take those technical terms and put them into quizzes for students or send them a word of the day. [Quizlet](#) also will put word collections into quizzes. You can put together the word collections, or ask your students to do that, and the collections and quizzes can be shared with the whole class. Online dictionaries and thesauruses can help students learn definitions, see examples, and hear pronunciation. The online thesaurus [Wordsmyth.net](#) is useful for finding similar words and meanings, and it also has a quiz function. The resource [Graphwords](#) makes a visual display of a word, showing a picture of similar vocabulary terms. You can also use an online browser such as Google to find images that will explain or represent many words. The tool [Lingro](#) is useful for online readings. When students enter a URL into the site, they can read the text and click on any words they don't know. The definition then pops up immediately, and students can study the wordlist Lingro creates based on the words they look up. But with

whatever tool you use, remember that students need to learn words in context, meaning it isn't very helpful to just give them a word list and ask them to memorize it for next class.

You might wonder what to start with, in terms of strategies for helping students with vocabulary. But don't get overwhelmed. A good start is to make a list of words that you think are important in your field. You can do this by reading through the textbook and listing words students may not know, listening to videos or podcasts on your topic and listening for potentially unknown words, paying attention to your lectures and writing down any words you use that students may not understand, or asking your colleagues to list words they think are important in your field.

Remember that it is not as useful to give your students a list of words before class and expect them to write down and memorize definitions, and then be ready to learn with those words for the next class. Students need to have new words put in context, or used and explained in their natural usage. Over time, you will develop your own system and strategies for helping students gain the vocabulary they need in order to understand your content in English.

Reference¹

Moriyasu, M. (2017). Explaining words: How EMI teachers conceptualize and deliver explanations of unfamiliar vocabulary. *Oxford Educational Cloud*, 1(1), 31-44.

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