

# English Vocabulary Teaching Strategies for Middle School Students — Based on the English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) in China

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## Abstract

The revision of the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the “New Curriculum Standard”) aims to strengthen the cultivation of students’ core competencies, highlight student-centered learning, and arouse teacher’s attention to student’s development and learning needs. Guided by the New Curriculum Standard, this article, based on the writer’s teaching experience, explores efficient vocabulary teaching methods that point to students’ core competencies and lays a foundation for students’ English learning.

**Keywords:** New Curriculum Standard, junior high school, English, vocabulary teaching, teaching strategies

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of technology and society, teenagers are increasingly exposed to exponentially-grew information, and traditional teaching methods have long been unable to meet the learning needs of students. Under the influence of traditional teaching, vocabulary teaching in junior high school easily falls into the pitfall of inefficient teaching that features “teacher-dominated” and “passive students”. Vocabulary is the basis for subsequent English learning, and students’ mastery of vocabulary directly affects their enthusiasm for learning English. Therefore, it is imperative to completely change the boring mechanical exercises in traditional teaching activities and innovate

vocabulary teaching methods. Based on this, the article will explore strategies to improve junior high school English vocabulary teaching from four aspects.

## 2. Build Mind Map

Mind map was invented by Tony Buzan, a British author and psychologist, as a note-taking technique which is regarded to be beneficial for learners to remember (Brinkmann, 2003; Holland, Holland & Davies, 2004; Buzan & Buzan, 2007), solve problems and be concentrated on certain subject (Buzan & Buzan, 2007), increase creativity (Mento, Martinelli & Jones, 1999; Buzan & Buzan, 2007) and sort out thoughts (Buzan & Buzan, 2005).

Mind maps are now widely utilized in every field nowadays. They are also welcomed by educators in learning and teaching due to their advantages in boosting skills in processing information (involving keywords, colours, numbers, logic, rhythm, image, and spatial awareness). The biggest feature of the mind map is that it organizes information around a central theme, and other related ideas and thoughts are laid out across different levels which helps learners or users to visualize how things evolve and develop and recall them more easily. According to Arulselvi (2017), “the focus on using single keywords can foster more expansive connections and confining the entire mind map to a single piece of paper allows one to see the entire picture at once and perhaps stimulate additional associations.” (p. 53)

Bearing this in mind, we could integrate the mind map’s features like “center theme developing” and “keywords” with what the New Curriculum Standard advocates about utilizing the theme, to help students with their vocabulary learning and expansion. The New Curriculum Standard articulates the function of the theme as: “It has the role of connecting and directing other content elements, providing contextual scope for language learning and curriculum education.” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2022, p. 12) The New Curriculum Standard divides the theme into three categories: “human and self, human and society, and human and nature.” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2022, p. 14) Within each category, there are theme groups and sub-themes. The introduction of themes helps teachers “teach contextually and guide students to learn language knowledge in an integrated way in real and meaningful language applications.” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic

of China, 2022, p. 38)

For textbook *Go for It!* each unit represents a separate sub-theme. When carrying out teaching activities, teachers can use the title of each unit to create a general context of unit teaching, stimulate students’ prior knowledge, and introduce new words by elaborately setting up question chains. Especially in the first section of each unit, in the lead-in step, introducing new from the old can help students build a vocabulary network, string scattered words in an organized way and facilitate memorization, therefore, a mind map would be an ideal technique to realize teaching goals. Take *Go for It!* Grade 7B Unit 5 Why Do You Like Pandas? for example, the theme of this unit is natural ecology which is under the “man and nature” theme group. Students are familiar with animals and would like to discuss the topic more. By using the theme, teachers can ask students to name some animals in the lead-in stage, followed by questions chains like “What animals do you like best? Why?” thus teachers are provoking students’ prior knowledge about animals, laying down the foundations for further introduced new vocabulary such as tiger, elephant, koala, etc. When students are giving answers, the teacher could write down new vocabulary on the board in a pattern of tree diagrams, the words are divided according to the origin of animals. The advantage of the practice is country and places can be presented at the same time as recording new animals’ names, helping students build connections between places and animals (Figure 1). Tree diagrams are not the only choice of visual tool, bubble charts could also be employed to sort out adjectives with other information. This could be done when students are giving reasons about why they like certain animals. (Figure 2).

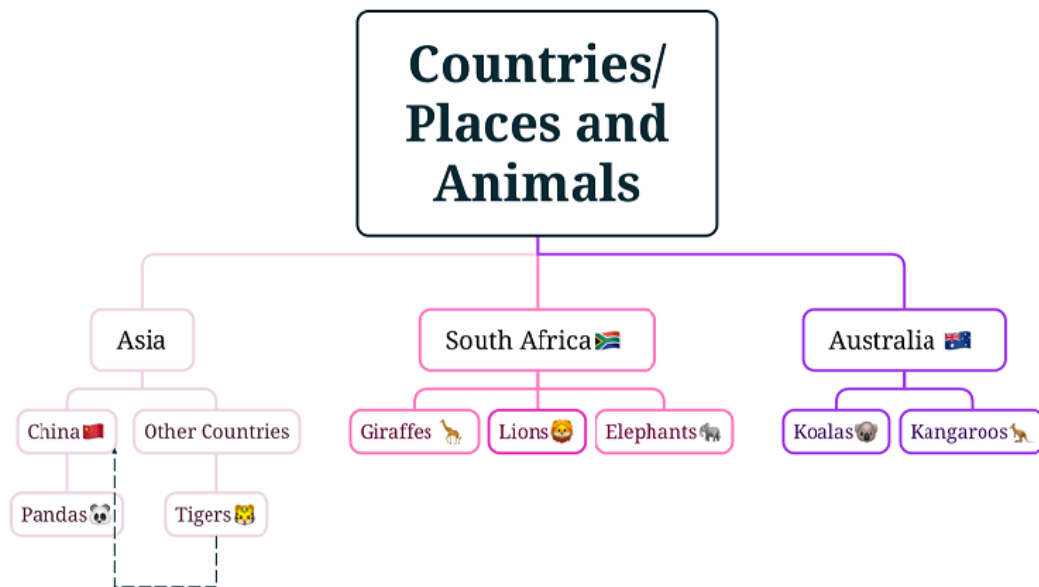


Figure 1. Tree mind map

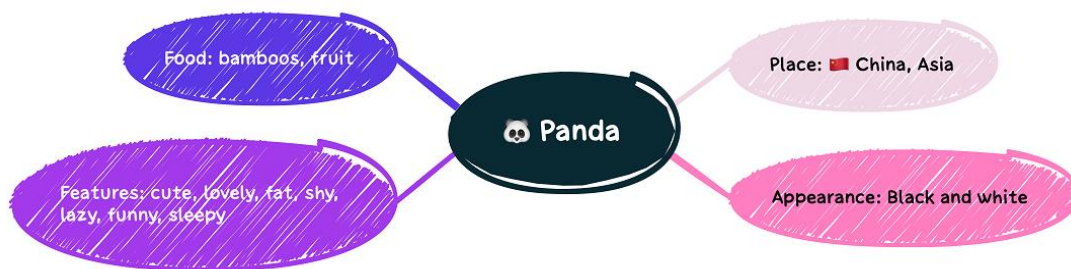


Figure 2. Bubble mind map

### 3. Integrate Teaching Materials and Reproduce Vocabulary and Lexical Chunks

The New Curriculum Standard advocates “necessary integration and reorganization of unit content, establish the connection between unit discourse content and its education function, and form an integrated, connected and developmental blueprint for unit education.” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2022, pp. 47-48) Therefore, when preparing lessons, teachers jump out of the box and don’t be limited to the natural unit contents. By analyzing the discourse in-depth we found that there are internal connections among textbooks throughout three-year grades. Implementing the overall teaching methods with the integration of cross-grade content of the same version of the textbook, and the content

integration of other versions of the textbook will greatly benefit students to form a deep understanding of the unit theme in the learning process, and internalize what they have learned and improve their learning ability in the activities with a large number of vocabulary reproductions.

#### 3.1 Cross-Grade Integration of the Same Version of the Textbook

Take *Go for It!* Grade 7B Unit 1 Can You Play the Guitar? for example, the topic of this unit is self-awareness under the theme of “people and myself”, the language function is to be able to talk about abilities and talents, and the vocabulary involved covers art, sports, learning, hobbies and so on. In Unit 5 Do You Have a Soccer Ball? in Grade 7A, the target vocabulary is exactly related to ball games which could be

referred to as sports abilities. Through integrating, teachers could design proper activities for students to recall previously learnt vocabulary on ball games, and then apply the vocabulary to the key sentence pattern “Can you...? Yes, I can. / No, I can’t.” to carry out engaged Q&A interactions to reproduce vocabulary and reinforce prior knowledge. The step, starting with the vocabulary students already know, could ease their anxiety when they are about to access new knowledge, which creates a safe and relaxing atmosphere to learn.

### 3.2 Integrate Textbooks of Different Versions

In addition to the same version of the textbook, teachers should also pay attention to integrating the teaching content of the textbook in different versions concerning the same topic to supplement and enrich their teaching and students’ vocabulary. For example, in *Go for It!* Grade 7A Unit 7 How Much Are These Socks? the unit is about the “life” topic under the social and cultural theme under the “man and society” category, and its function is to ask about prices and talk about clothing when shopping. According to a review of other versions of English textbooks, for example, *English*, the textbook of Beijing Normal University Press, the vocabulary of Grade 7B Unit 3 Food and Drink is not only about food but also integrates shopping situations, utilizing food topic then creating learning needs for students to ask for the price, successfully ushering key sentence patterns “How much...? How many...?” and the expression of price (involving the expression of numbers in English). Inspired by this, teachers could design shopping scenes, teach students more common food vocabulary, and then combine the clothing vocabulary of the unit to let students simulate the conversations that occur during shopping, by asking for prices, students reproduce numbers and food vocabulary learned in Unit 1 My Name’s Gina and Unit 6 Do You Like Bananas? Meanwhile, when conducting conversations, students repeat “how much” phrase and compare its usage between that of “how many” phrase. It promotes students’ language application and improves their communication ability.

### 4. Borrowing Ideas from Drama in Education

As rounds of educational reforms have been implemented, educators are increasingly paying attention to developing more effective methods to achieve quality education. More oral practices

are focused on within the classrooms. The last three decades have witnessed the development of various EFL teaching methods in China, among these is “Communicative Language Teaching” (or CLT for short). The approach gives favorable conditions for interactive learning which was proved as an effective tool to cultivate listening and speaking skills for communicative purposes and facilitate learning various vocabulary and sentence patterns. Thus, CLT is welcomed and adopted by most English teachers in China. However, the approach undoubtedly has its disadvantages, increasing vocabulary and sentences does not necessarily guarantee students’ functional communication skills. Not given opportunities to apply what learned into practice, students could easily find that they forget much of what has been taught over some time. Additionally, accuracy isn’t given the same emphasis as fluency considering CLT theory which could impact students’ progress at the advanced stage. Moreover, it is believed that “lack of context” and “faked situation” should be also accounted as drawbacks which put learning vocabulary in isolation so that it becomes difficult to grasp the full range of meanings and nuances of a word. What’s more, “CLT may have potential limitations to some groups of learners due to social and cultural backgrounds and perspectives.” (Dos Santos, 2020) As teenagers are shy and reluctant to show themselves if they are not confident with their oral English. Therefore, CLT may have shortcomings in engaging students to learn and retain new vocabulary.

As a language, English naturally has the attribute of communication. Not confined to two-person dialogue, communication is a dynamic process that can occur among many people, it not only facilitates information exchange but also carries opinions and emotions. According to Cazden (2001), this kind of interaction (usually between teacher and students or among students) functions much like an informal, natural dialogue, and is regarded by theoreticians of discourse “as central to learning and particularly literacy development in schools.” (Ranzau & Horowitz, 2017, p. 101) Hence, dialogue and interaction play important roles in learning a language.

The idea of emphasizing interaction could find its counterpart in the New Curriculum Standard as it also promotes “(teachers should) make full

use of the interactive and social features of the classroom to create cooperative learning opportunities for students, such as reading circles, readers' theatre, etc., to lead students to analyze, scrutinize, appreciate and evaluate and criticize from multiple perspectives, to compare cultural similarities and differences, and to generate collisions of thought." (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022, p. 40) Inspired by this, introducing "Drama in Education" (hereinafter referred to as "DIE") may be a solution to the losses of traditional teaching methods and to inspire vocabulary teaching in an integrated way.

Featured contextual learning, DIE encourages students to participate physically and emotionally, which benefits them in memorizing, retaining, and applying new vocabulary in different contexts. Research shows that "the use of long-term memory is greatly enhanced by the use of drama since the students are acting out and using different senses." (Demircioğlu, 2010, p. 442) In addition to making learning more memorable, DIE also "leads to a positive gain in personal qualities such as poise and self-confidence, as well as in interpersonal qualities such as empathy, tolerance and adaptability." Yassa (1999), which is beneficial for communicative skills development and "enables students to search for new possibilities within themselves and the broader world." (Brookfield, 1987, p. 39)

DIE was developed by Dorothy Heathcote in the 1950s, a program to train teachers and students to use dram-based pedagogy activities in England (Wagner, 1999). The pedagogy didn't enter the scope of Chinese educators until the 1980s when a teacher from Tianjin Normal College "adapted Chinese textbooks of middle schools into textbook plays ... can be regarded as the first Chinese localizing exploration of educational drama." (Zhou & Chen, 2020, p. 41) Many DIE techniques are widely used in education, such as still-image, thought tracking, conscience alley, hot seating, story performance, two truths one lie, still-image and thought tracking and so on. Teachers could use some of these activities to lead students to share ideas, practice new knowledge, develop peer learning, solve problems, and develop higher-order thinking skills in real situations, during which students could enjoy themselves and appreciate the charm of the English language.

#### 4.1 Still-Image and Thought Tracking

Still-image or tableau is an activity that allows participants to use their bodies to explore scenarios. To play the game, participants need to play a certain role with feelings and thoughts, they could walk or move freely in the scene. The teacher could ask them to freeze, and when they freeze, a toolkit called "thought tracking" could be followed up naturally. To implement the strategy, the teacher unfreezes characters by tapping them, and other participants as the audience could ask questions about characters and their motivations. The game "enables students to freely practice the concepts and techniques covered in the lesson." (British Council Hong Kong, 2009, p. 6) And the technique also "enables us to listen together to a character's inner thoughts at a particular moment in the drama." (Baldwin, 2019) These activities help reinforce new vocabulary, interpret emotions, develop observation and analytical skills, as well as enhance the ability to express oneself physically and emotionally.

In *Go for It!* for example, in Grade 7A Section B 2b, there is a passage about a girl named Molly who wrote to Dr. Know to complain about her family and school rules and asked for help. Teachers could use "still-image" and "thought tracking" to engage students and let them explore different learning experiences.

To implement the game, teachers need to design activities to get students ready. In the beginning, after reading Molly's letter, the teacher could organize students to list Molly's school and family rules and then ask them which rules are reasonable and favorable. After that students are grouped according to rules that they support. In the next step, each group need to show their chosen rule by showing a still image, when they're acting, the teacher asks questions to help them track their thoughts, for example, "Whom are you playing?", "What are you doing right now?", "What are you thinking at present?" etc. In this way, students could understand more about Molly, about Molly's parents, about why there are so many rules at school. During the process, students are guided to express feelings and opinions in the first person, so they can think in other's shoes and reflect themselves in time. Using language to perform requires a deep understanding of the text, not only on vocabulary, lexical chunks, phrases, and grammar level but also the values conveyed by the text. The games provide students opportunities to connect themselves with



situations created by the discourse, activate them to respond to the discourse and its author, as well as to develop their critical thinking and language competency.

#### 4.2 Hot Seating

Hot seating (or improvised interview) refers to “a form of drama.....to help actors “think on their feet,” make inferences about the situation, and learn to listen to each other.” (Ranzau & Horowitz, 2017, p. 105). The approach is for the student playing a character to take turns sitting in a designated seat or area and is asked questions or given prompts by others. The technique helps explore the character’s motivations, thoughts, or feelings and it has been also proven effective in encouraging students’ problem-solving, critical thinking and decision-making skills.

Let’s take a look at an example from *Go for It!* Grade 8A Unit 1 Where did You Go on Vacation? In Section B 2b, there is a diary about Jane’s vacation spent in Malaysia. In the diary, Jane described details on how she and her father spent a day was on Penang Hill. Naturally, the diary states most contents from the perspective of Jane, but the role of her father, if it’s employed wisely, could help learners comprehend the diary more deeply. This could be done by using a “hot seating” game. The teacher could let students play “Jane” and “her father” respectively and guide the rest of the class to ask questions constructively. It’s helpful that the teacher acts as a facilitator to ensure the rest of the students can ask proper questions. For example, it’s a good idea to ask “wh-” questions for the diary entry, like “What happened on Penang Hill?” “What happened after it rained?”, “Why did you get wet?” and “How did you feel when you got wet?” etc. To ask similar questions, students need to recall the sequence in which events occurred but also remember exactly what the characters did and what happened on that day. To answer questions, the student on the “hot seat” needs to use correct verbs and verbal phrases in past tense which involves practicing grammatical accuracy and reinforcing the usage of lexical chunks. During the process of the game, students need to recall events and describe them, so that the actions of the characters are pictured, which helps to visualize target words and lexical chunks, benefiting students in understanding and deepening memory. In addition, the technique is useful for developing students’ empathy by “putting

themselves in others’ shoes” and is ideal for cultivating creative thinking abilities.

Other techniques from DIE are also interesting and inspiring, and they could be taken as creative teaching methods and a constructive way to traditional ones. However, it is recommended that teachers discuss the procedures of the games with students and make sure that they are familiar with and understand them. Also, given the psychological features of teenagers, there is a need for teachers to develop self-confidence and expression ability among students, hence, certain encouragement systems could be introduced. Moreover, teachers need to focus on promoting cooperative skills and natural communication manner to help students better get information and solve problems. Finally, according to students’ capacity and learning content, teachers need to select and redesign teaching content to reach an ideal learning outcome.

#### 5. Integrate Disciplines to Expand Students’ Vocabulary and Improve Their Abilities to Think Independently

Adhering to the advocacy of the New Curriculum Standard on “carrying out comprehensive practical activities in English” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2022, p. 41), English teachers should embrace other subjects, integrate relevant knowledge within the same topic, and guide students to carry out projects during which students will use English to solve problems and apply the language into practice.

For instance, when we check Section B from *Go for It!* Grade 7A Unit 7 How Much Are These Socks? Exercise 3b requires students to write an advertisement for their own clothes store. While lesson 2.3 from the art subject of the same grade, its teaching content is also related to clothes — designing the ideal school uniform. Inspired by this, when designing activities for the writing task, teachers can first teach the vocabulary of different types of clothing, then allow students to give full play to their art talents to design and “produce” their clothes for their store. Students are grouped into five or six and then assigned a project, the members interact and cooperate in achieving the design and production, which helps them to associate specific “objects” with vocabulary, boosting long-term memory. In the process of composing the advertisement, the target vocabulary is reproduced, and the goal of

solving practical problems is achieved by using language knowledge and skills. In a new transferred context, students create, communicate, and improve their language literacy, the example could be regarded as a successful example of realizing holistic education.

## 6. Conclusion

Vocabulary acquisition is a vital element for further successful language learning. Integrating the writer's teaching experience, this article explores new methods to teach vocabulary and attempts to put forward more possibilities to reduce the monotony of memorization and enhance students' learning efficiency under the guidance of concepts presented by the New Curriculum Standard.

It can be said that the exploration of the article casts a light on English teachers in aspects of teaching strategies and tools, as well as a benefit for supplementing the traditional teaching methods. It could also serve as an inspiration for teaching grammar, reading, and writing in English at other academic levels. It could be useful for designing curriculum, classroom activities, after-school practices, and assessments.

In general, many methods are being used in daily classrooms, there is no single theory or approach that is appropriate for all students. Teachers, need to constantly discover problems in their everyday classrooms and reflect as well as keep updated on cutting-edge research, to positively work out solutions to meet the expectations and learning needs of their students. Meanwhile, vocabulary teaching should not be confined to teaching vocabulary merely, teachers also need to balance the development of other skills, scopes, and subjects.

It is worth noting that there are some limitations in the article. To begin with, due to the author's teaching experience being based in junior school, the article only investigates teaching practices in narrow settings, therefore the methods may not apply to other academic levels. Secondly, we should consider that due to imbalance developments among areas throughout the country, the methods proposed in the article may not be effective for all teaching environments. Moreover, not all teachers have access to the updated concepts in the New Curriculum Standard. Thirdly, the lack of

related training and the absence of powerful teaching teams have posed barriers to making innovations in teaching since the implementation of the New Curriculum Standard could not be done solely by individual teachers. Finally, the article doesn't cover the school administration's impact which acts as an element in carrying out the new outlook of the New Curriculum Standard.

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