

Camtree Digital Library



Using worksheets to teach vocabulary

Author	Lizárraga, Ilse León
Title	Using worksheets to teach vocabulary
Publisher	British Council
Publication date	2021
Download date	2026-06-12 13:56:44
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14069/793

2 Using worksheets to teach vocabulary

Ilse A. León Lizárraga

Hermosillo, Sonora



A challenging context

Ilse teaches English at Magisterio II, a poorly resourced primary school located in the south-west of the city, Hermosillo, in the north-western state of Sonora. The school is located in a particularly poor area of the city where there is a lot of violence and drug-related activity. At the time of this project, Ilse taught only one group, Grade 1A, since she was studying for a master's degree.



Grade 1A consisted of a group of 18 students (nine boys and nine girls) aged five to eleven. The reason for this wide age range was due to the fact that some of the children had been taken out of school, sometimes for years due to parental drug abuse, kidnapping, custody battles, etc., and when they returned they were put into Grade 1 to catch up on what they had missed. However, despite the differences in age, there were few difficulties since they were all at beginner level (they knew some colours, numbers and a few words in English) although some were not able to read well. Ilse taught them three times a week for 50 minutes and found them keen to learn.

What Ilse wanted to know

Ilse found that the instructions and exercises in the textbook and workbook were quite complicated for her students due to their level of English, so she usually used simple worksheets to complement the book. She had done this with all her classes, regularly, and so she thought it would be useful to explore how effective these were and whether her students found them helpful.

To focus her exploration, Ilse came up with four questions:

- Q1 What are my objectives when using worksheets every day in my English classes?
- Q2 What do my students think about using worksheets?
- Q3 What type of activities are in the worksheets that I usually use?
- Q4 How effective are the worksheets in complementing the book?

And to find answers to these, she decided to analyse some lesson plans, keep a journal and informally interview her students.

Lesson plan analysis

Ilse decided to analyse three lesson plans in relation to her four questions. To make this easy for herself, she decided to highlight the information using four different colours, so for example, if she were to find any information that gave her answers to Q1, she would use green, and so on.

Define my purposes when using worksheets.

How many worksheets do I plan to use for this lesson?

In which moments of the class do I plan to use the worksheets?

How much time do I plan to dedicate to each worksheet?

Ilse's colour coding for her lesson plan analysis

Reflective journal

Ilse also decided that it would be a good idea to reflect on each of these three lessons immediately afterward and note down answers to some questions she had prepared. Again, she thought that using different colours would help her to identify answers to these questions.

How did I choose today's worksheets?

Did I have to modify or adapt the worksheets? Why did I think it was/wasn't necessary to modify or adapt the worksheets?

Did I use all the worksheets I planned to during the class? If not, how many did I use? Why did/didn't I use all the worksheets I planned to during the class?

Was the time dedicated to each worksheet enough? Why? If not, why not?

Why do I think today's worksheets were successful (or unsuccessful)?

Ilse's colour coding for her journal notes

Interviews

To get information from her students, Ilse thought it would be most appropriate to interview them orally in Spanish and informally because of their English and literacy levels. She prepared a script and decided to interview all 18 of them one by one in Spanish a separate room. She also decided to audio-record their answers so that she could listen to them in more detail later. Ilse's reasons for interviewing this way was that she wanted to avoid distractions, but more importantly, she didn't want students to be influenced by others' answers. She felt that there was more chance of them answering honestly if she asked them individually. In fact, on the day of the interview, just 12 students were interviewed as six were absent. (Attendance was an ongoing issue and Ilse never had a full class of 18 anyway.)

During the English classes we have worked with worksheets and I'm going to ask you some questions to find out what you think about these worksheets. So what am I going to ask you?
[If they don't know how to answer, I'll explain once more].

[Questions]

- What do you think when you are doing the worksheets that I give you? And why do you think that?
- Why do you think we use worksheets?
- How do you complete the worksheets we use?
- And how do you feel when you finish all the worksheets we use? Why do you feel that way?

Okay, thank you very much, you can go back to your place/room.

Interview script
(translated from Spanish)

Answers to Ilse's questions

Q1. What are my objectives when using worksheets every day in my English classes?

Ilse found that her main reason for using worksheets was to teach students vocabulary, which was a surprise since she had thought that she was using them to practise writing and speaking. However, when she looked at her lesson plan analyses and her journal notes, she noticed that she had asked students to:

- identify the rooms of a house and trace the names of the rooms;
- identify the furniture that belongs to each room and that which does not belong and write the words; and
- identify the chores they can do in the different rooms of the house.

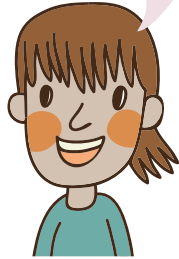
Q2. What do my students think about using worksheets?

Ilse had already suspected that her students liked using worksheets and their responses confirmed this – all of them said they enjoyed doing them. However, they weren't all clear about why they were using them – seven thought they were for learning English while five thought they were for colouring, drawing and writing.

To learn English.



To colour, draw and write.



Q3. What type of activities are in the worksheets that I usually use?

From her notes, Ilse identified different types of activities:

- students cut, glue and colour;
- students trace the name of a room, cross out the object that doesn't belong in it and then write the furniture word that does belong; and
- trace and write.

but she also noted that the most frequent instruction was 'Colour!' and that colouring took up a lot of the time.

color. The time wasn't enough only three ss completely finished the work. The other thirteen ss did cut and glue the furnitures in their right room but didn't color it.

Journal extract (3rd October)

Q4. How effective are the worksheets in complementing the book?

From her lesson plan analyses and journal notes, Ilse found evidence that the worksheets were effective in helping students to remember vocabulary, although not all students and not all of the words.

Journal entry

Before starting the class, I asked students guided questions to check if they remembered the vocabulary we practised in the worksheets during the last class. Ss were able to identify some

vocabulary like kitchen and bathroom, sofa, TV, lamp and toilet.

Images help Ss to remember vocabulary – when I showed Ss the drawing or picture and asked, 'What is this?' they answered correctly for most of the images.

Using the vocabulary, Ss were excited when I showed and explained the worksheet and while they were working on it, they were focused. I notice that images help Ss remember information.

Journal extract (11th October)

Ilse drew three conclusions from her findings, which she could reflect on and act on:

I need to find a way to help students realise that we are doing these worksheet exercises to learn English vocabulary and since images are helpful in learning vocabulary, I need to use more images.

I need to include different activities in the worksheets or use different strategies to teach vocabulary apart from getting students to 'colour'.

What could Ilse change?

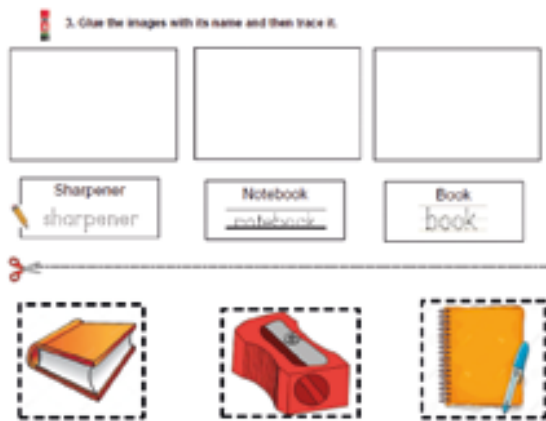
Taking into consideration the information Ilse got from her exploration, she looked at the topics in the book, e.g. classroom objects, animals, numbers and colours, and designed and created new worksheets in colour (so students didn't need to spend time colouring). All the worksheets followed the same format and included the same three different matching activities focused on ten words:

1. Students choose the correct word (from two) to match to the image;



Example of activity 1

2. Students cut out and glue the image next to the correct word;
3. Students then trace the word that matches the image.



Example of activities 2 and 3

Ilse used these worksheets during the development stage of every lesson for a period of two weeks.



Were the changes effective?

To evaluate the impact of these actions, at the end of the two weeks, Ilse again used lesson plan analysis to know how much time she allowed students to complete the activities, how instructions were managed, and to check if the size of the images was appropriate to the tasks.

In her reflective journal, which she completed after every lesson, she focused on:

- the words students remembered the most;
- the difficulties students faced when completing the worksheets;
- if the time given was enough; and
- if she thought the worksheets were successful.

And, at the end of the first and second week of using the new worksheets, she interviewed the students again in Spanish and asked them:

- Which worksheet was your favourite?
- Was it easy or difficult to do the worksheets?
- Did you understand the instructions?
- Which exercise type did you prefer?
- Do you think the worksheets help you to learn vocabulary in English?
- Would you like to continue using worksheets?

**Interview questions
(translated from Spanish)**

What Ilse discovered

From her journal notes, Ilse realised that at the start of each lesson, she asked students a series of questions to check how well they had remembered the words, and she found that they had learned between three and five each time, which was very encouraging.

Ss remembered the words dog, donkey,
 cow, horse, pig, cat, chicken and duck.
 The matching exercise was a little bit
 difficult because some Ss don't know
 how to read yet. Ss also had some
 trouble at choosing the right word
 from two options.
 The time given was enough, Ss finished
 on time because they were familiar with
 the instructions.
 When we checked the answer Ss
 had most of them correct. Ss also

Journal extract (13th January)

She also observed that since the format of each worksheet was the same, students quickly got used to the format so she didn't need to spend time repeating instructions and students didn't take too much time completing them. In fact, all her students said they could easily understand the instructions when asked. However, some students faced difficulties with matching words because they were still learning to read.

② Ss now are familiar with
 the pattern of the instructions
 in the worksheets so that
 helped them to answer them
 faster.
 ③ The size of images and letters
 were appropriate.

Extract from final lesson plan notes

During the interviews, it was clear that all students were completely aware that the worksheets were designed to help them learn vocabulary in English and they said they enjoyed doing all of the activity types.

The majority of students said their favourite was the 'cut, glue and trace' activity because they liked cutting and thought it was fun. Those who could read preferred matching words and pictures.

Moreover, the vast majority said they preferred the new worksheets, although not surprisingly, those who were still learning to read preferred the previous worksheets because they were easier i.e. they only had to colour.



They're colourful and pretty!

They have animals and school objects I like.



What Ilse learned

Ilse feels it was really useful to explore the situation at the start of her research because it helped her to become aware of why she was using worksheets, and once she understood that, she realised that there was too much 'colouring' and that she hadn't thought about the number of words she was teaching and practising. Besides that, she wasn't paying much attention when choosing worksheets either. Her findings made her more conscious of all these things.

I need to be more careful when teaching new vocabulary and not introduce too many words, just 3 or 5, and I need to be careful when selecting or making worksheets too!

She also discovered that routine and patterns work. Using the same worksheet format over and over again saves both her and her students time and makes it easier for them to 'get on with their work' and learn. And asking students their opinions about activities is a good way to know if they are effective.

Sometimes it's easy to carry on using the same strategy and assume students like it without knowing if it's effective, or not.

Final reflections

Doing this Exploratory Action Research gave Ilse the opportunity to examine her teaching – her beliefs, approach, strategies, and so on. It also gave her the chance to find out what her students thought about a particular approach or activity, and to use that information when making decisions on whether or not to make changes or improvements.

I will definitely continue using this approach, not only to be a better teacher but to give my students an opportunity to express their thoughts and take these into consideration.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the British Council for giving me the opportunity to be part of this project. I must also thank my mentor Martha de la Cruz for her time and guidance. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the principal of the school, Erika Gutiérrez, the teacher of the group, Jaqueline Quijano, and to all the students who participated.

Reflection

"Sometimes it's easy to carry on using the same strategy and assume students like it without knowing if it's effective, or not." Doing this project gave Ilse the opportunity to examine her use of worksheets and make changes or improvements. Most teachers tend to have their favourite strategies and resources but are they effective? Could they be improved? What are your 'favourites'? Are they as effective as they could be? How do you know? What could you do to find out?