# Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

## Developing High Level Vocabulary

**Reaseheath College – June 2022**

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For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/.

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# Developing High Level Vocabulary

## Reaseheath College

## SUMMARY

The project intended to extend learners' vocabulary enabling them to achieve in both English and their main subject area. Learners were introduced to high-value vocabulary with a range of strategies being used to aid their understanding and confidence in using the new vocabulary. English and vocational teachers worked together to reinforce and embed learning.

## RATIONALE

Our project extends our previous research from OTLA 7 (ETF, 2021), which found we underestimated how 'word poor' our learners were; conversely, learners overestimate their knowledge of words and meanings. This issue continues to exist as in English lessons learners are introduced to often indecipherable vocabulary frequently leading to disengagement and inappropriate behaviour. We worked with learners to improve and enrich their vocabularies, enabling them to achieve a grade 4 in GCSE English Language. Our further aim was to ensure learners recognise the value of good English skills in supporting them to achieve in their subject specialism. To enable this, we worked with vocational lecturers encouraging them to embed vocabulary-based activities into their lessons.

### Other Contextual Information

Our action research was part of the Education and Training Foundation's OTLA 8 Programme. Our college is situated in Nantwich, Cheshire East. Some learners originate from relatively disadvantaged areas and lack access to books, learning materials and technologies. Our Case Studies were specifically selected from a Foundation group; however, we also worked with other groups of learners, from Animal Management and Mathematics, in which there is a variety of academic abilities.

The Foundation group includes a wide variety of capabilities, with a significant proportion of learners hindered by barriers to learning. Since our objective was to encourage active use of new vocabulary, rather than receiving it passively, we were curious about what impact our research project would have on the group in which there is an explicit dichotomy.

# APPROACH

We conducted our research cyclically, reflecting on the impact of activities and gaining feedback from team members and learners (see Appendix 4 and Appendix 6). This enabled us to evaluate the impact of our work and make any amendments necessary.

We created 'initial assessments' (Appendix 5.1) to establish which words learners knew. Maths and Vocational staff (Animal Management) were involved in distributing the 'Words of the Week', so learners could understand language is applicable across all spectra of learning, not just English.

- **Activity 1** (Two Tasks): Word Search and Synonyms: In Task 1, learners were given a word search, in which there were twenty words: ten high-register, low-frequency words; and ten synonyms for each of the high-register words. For Task 2, learners were asked to match the words (see Appendix 5.2).

- **Activity 2:** (Three Tasks): Learners were asked to rate how confident they felt using each of the ten words in a sentence. Next, they wrote down what they thought was the correct definition of the words, integrating each of the ten words into a sentence, so we could evaluate if they were being used correctly.

Afterwards, we integrated each of the keywords into our lessons as starter tasks. PowerPoint slides were specifically designed to suit the course areas we shared the keywords with; we wanted to ensure each of the keywords was relatable to the course areas and address any potential resistance or hesitancy to the teaching and learning of each key word.



As a result of learner interviews (Appendix 4), our approach altered slightly as we decided to focus more on oracy. We discovered some learners preferred to read out their work to see whether they used keywords correctly rather than writing them down. Some learners preferred to hear the new keywords spoken in context rather than seeing them in sentences on a PowerPoint presentation. We, therefore, produced an audio recording for each word in which it was spoken aloud, followed by its definition with an example of its use in a sentence (Appendix 5.3). Learners could then scan the QR code and listen to it at their leisure.

*Figure 1. An example of one of our posters, developed after speaking with learners.*

Below is an extract from one of our learner interviews, evidencing how we were able to adapt our approaches in response to learner need as the project progressed:

> **Learner A:** "I think it would be nice if we could read out our work at the end of a lesson."
>
> **Interviewer:** "So, do you think it's a better idea then to hear the keywords spoken instead of writing them?"
>
> **Learner A**: "Yeah, pretty much."
>
> **Interviewer:** "And – why is that?"
>
> **Learner A:** "It's just easier to see if we have used it right in our work."
>
> Learners were also given bookmarks with the keywords. (Appendix 5.4, for example).

# OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

## Teaching, Learning and Assessment

One significant impact is learners' autonomous reaction to the words of the week. Originally, a significant proportion of learners indicated their attitude towards vocabulary development by expressions of boredom, lethargy and disinterest; however, as we introduced the final few words, learners displayed no negative reaction, beginning to integrate some of the words into their work more frequently than others (Appendix 3). What was a very positive thing to see was that some learners even used a small variety of keywords in answers to their mock exam papers. (See, in the example below, how a learner attempted to use *curious* and *immense* in the correct context).



Q2.

The writer uses language to describe Ugwu's impression of the city, by using a simile "bungalows were painted the colour of the sky and sat side by side like polite well-dressed men". The adjective "polite " associates with someone bieng very kind and generous. This suggests that the city was very bright and colourful,that the impression of the city from ugwu's showing that he had an extrodinary feeling. This feeling of Ugwu's impression of the city is hightened with his emotions.

The writer uses language to describe Ugwu's impression of the city, by using a hyperbole "He was prepared to walk hours more in even hotter sun" the verb "prepared" associates with organisation and thinking ahead of time. This suggests that Ugwu's decision is curious and immense to how he is feeling. He also shows that the feeling of exultant, meaning that he is triumphantly happy and can't wait to keep exploring the city. This links with how much he is willing to fight to keep walking to see the city.

*Figure 2. Learners experiment with new vocabulary.*

After interviewing learners again towards the end of the project, it was interesting to note the impact that the oracy posters had.

> **Interviewer:** "So, we spoke about the bookmarks last time, and one of you mentioned how it would be more effective to listen to the keywords instead of writing them down from off the board. Have you both found this to be the case?"
>
> **Learner B:** "Not particularly. I sometimes feel if you tried to scan the QR code in a lesson and it took ages to load, you might get distracted by your phone."
>
> **Interviewer:** "Ok, that's interesting. What about you, [Learner A]?"
>
> **Learner A:** "Yeah, because talking will obviously mean you can use the word more, so there's more chance you will use it right."
>
> **Interviewer:** "So, do you mean more chance of using it in the correct context?"
>
> **Learner A:** "Yeah, so you'll understand it more."

Additionally, we have seen a positive change in vocational and maths staff's attitudes. Some members of staff were initially a little reluctant to integrate these words into their lessons, either because they thought English was not a priority, failed to recognise the relevance of English in their lessons, or lacked the confidence to introduce literacy activities. However, after becoming involved in the project and realising the value of supporting vocabulary development their attitude has

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changed to a more welcoming one.

One thing we were significantly pleased with was the progress demonstrated in our Case Studies learners' "initial assessment" activities when completed the second time around. (Appendix 2). At the beginning of the project Learner A firmly believed they had no confidence in using 40% of the keywords and complete confidence in using 60% of the keywords. However, some of the definitions of the keywords were quite vague, and some were incorrect, for example, the words curious and defiant despite the learner saying they had full confidence in using the words. In the "initial assessment" completed by Learner A at the end of the project, there was a clear, significant difference in the learner's confidence rating in comparison with the first time around: the learner felt 100% confidence in their ability to use the keywords in a sentence. As one can also see, all words had their definitions filled in by Learner A, and the meanings were far more accurate than the first time Learner A attempted the assessment.

In the "initial assessment" completed by Learner B they had 40% high confidence in using the keywords, 50% a little confidence and 10% minor confidence. Some of the definitions written were a little vague, such as the one for "majestic"; however, the majority of what is written is relatively accurate. In the "initial assessment" completed by Learner B at the end of the project, the difference between their confidence in using each keyword in a sentence is quite substantial. The learner now feels very confident using 70% of the keywords, mostly confident using 20% of the keywords and moderately confident using 10% of the keywords. Notice how some definitions the learner had written had become more accurate and precise. "Majestic" has a far more crystalline definition than the one thought of for the "Initial Assessment" at the beginning of the project.


## Professional Development

| Professional Standard | How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard |
|---|---|
| **2. Evaluate and challenge your practice, values and beliefs.** | The project has certainly reinforced the need for us to reflect and meditate on our preconceptions about learners' levels of vocabulary despite their age, and the necessity of constantly exposing learners to new vocabulary because a wide vocabulary is so important when it comes to attaining marks indicative of Grade 4 or above in GCSE examinations. It has certainly thrown into sharp relief how learners engage with new vocabulary, too, in addition to how effective oracy can be when it comes to rendering new, high-register, low-frequency vocabulary as 'active' as opposed to 'passive'. |
| **13. Motivate and inspire learners to promote achievement and develop their skills to enable progression.** | In addition to developing the vocabulary of our learners, which will certainly contribute to their progression in question 5 on Paper 1, we have changed some of our learners' perspectives on the importance of English and language itself. Learners feel a sense of empowerment and satisfaction from the utilisation of the keywords we have delivered to them throughout the course of the project. For example, one Learner said the following:<br><br>*"Using these keywords feels cool as it makes me sound intelligent."* |

| **19. Maintain and update knowledge of your subject and/or vocational area.** | Since working closely with colleagues from Animal Management, we have learned a significant amount about how their course is constructed, what areas of study the learners undertake at the three levels, what is evaluated when learners compose their responses and how Animal Management also integrate their own Words of the Week in lessons, too. |
|---|---|

## Organisational Development
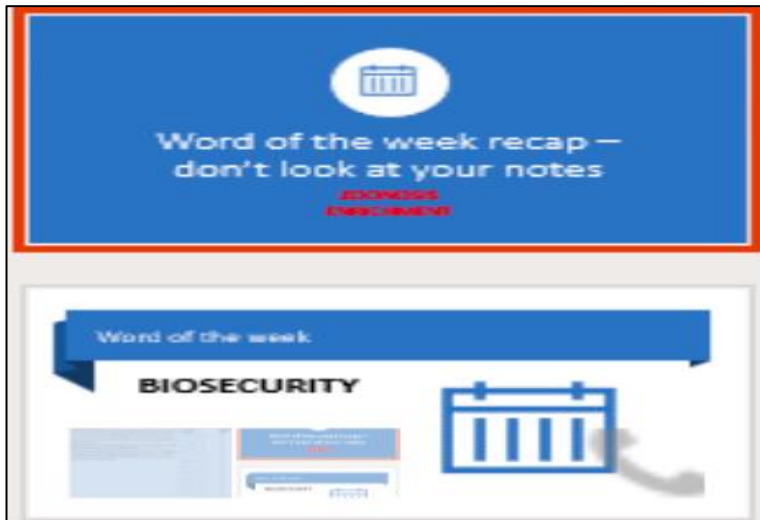
*Figure 3. Word of the week.*

As stated earlier in the report, in addition to the maths department, with whom we were already in close contact, we linked with Animal Management, the biggest vocational area on campus. Our collaborative relationship is evident through their willing participation in the project, distributing the keywords (or Words of the Week) to their learners, and the Cross College English meetings the English team delivered for them. Organisational development has also arisen throughout the English department with learning that Animal Management have a Word of the Week activity, too; however, the learners' interaction with it is different: it is predicated on them finding the definition of the word before putting it into a sentence and using it in their theoretical work for that session. (See evidence below from Animal Management SoW and an example of their Word of the Week slide)

| 4 - Quality | **Century (30 minutes)** - Learners to be instructed to log in and access Century. They are to be told that the password that they use will remain for Century throughout their time at Reaseheath and they should make a note of it. All learners are to be instructed to complete the Initial Assessments for both maths and English. It should be explained that they should try their best, but the result won't affect their course, instead it will allow tutors to evaluate current working levels for literacy and numeracy. There will be opportunities to continue in the next couple of weeks if the Initial Assessments aren't completed today. Any returning learners should still complete the Initial Assessments as there should be an 'in year' measure of literacy and numeracy. Course Manager should ensure that learners do not spend more than 45 minutes on Century to allow for other tasks later in the session. This will also be picked up in APW sessions.<br>**iDEAS (30 minutes)** – students to be introduced to iDEAS and instructed how to log in and set up an account. Each week students will be instructed to complete an iDEAS badge beginning with the compulsory badges. This week the students will need to be instructed to complete the **BRAIN HACK** badge.<br>**Word of the Week (15 minutes)** – each week a word of the week should be researched by the students. They should begin to build a glossary of terms and add a word each week. This week they should research **ZOONOSIS**. Students should find a definition and record this in their glossary together with a sentence that includes the term in an appropriate way. This must be completed before the students can leave the class.<br>**Introduction to Thursday's Lesson (15 minutes)** – Skills Development lessons on a Thursday will be delivered asynchronously. Students will have expectations of the next session set out with the topic highlighted and a brief discussion about the subject will be facilitated. |
|---|---|

*Figure 4. Extract from Animal Management SOW.*

# LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

**What went well:**

- Learners thought that the bookmark has been incredibly useful.

- The oracy posters were used later in the project's timeline, and learners found them a very effective tool to quickly access the keywords. In addition, the novelty of the keyword posters also made a positive, even comedic, impact as it piqued learners' curiosity: *"Wait, is that [name anonymised] from English? That's actually a really good idea having those as sound recordings!"*

- It is evident learners started to use the keywords in their work without prompting from the project bookmark. In the Case Studies examples the learners used a few of the keywords from the bookmark in the correct context: extraordinary, curious and vulnerable.

- Other examples of how learners, outside of the Case Studies, also integrated some of the OTLA keywords into their own writings are shown in Appendix 6.

- As demonstrated by the Animal Management department other curriculum areas started introducing Words of the Week into their Schemes of Work, too – something these practitioners spoke openly about in one of the CPD sessions hosted by the English team as part of our college's "Cross College CPD".
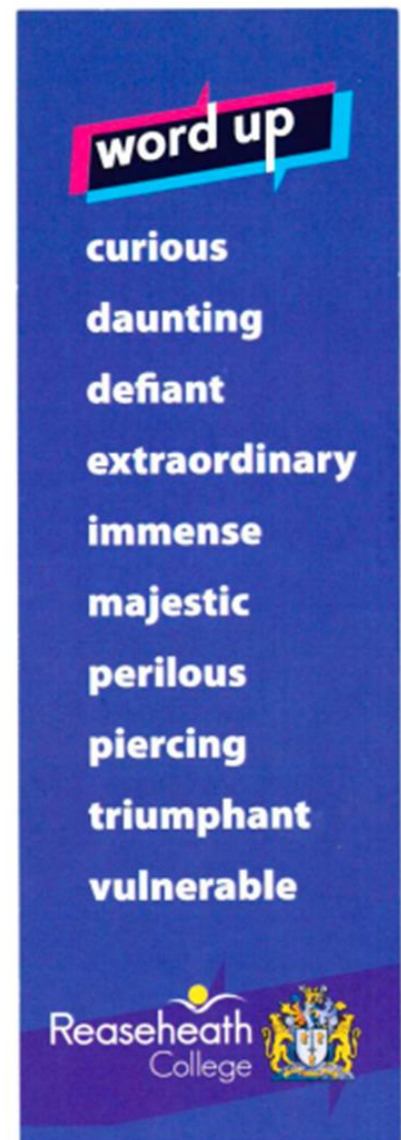
*Figure 5. Our vocabulary bookmark.*

**Even better if:**

- In future, ensuring there is consistency throughout the department: all lecturers using the same Words of the Week, even in maths and vocational areas.

- Lecturers endeavouring to use each word of the week verbally, so learners can hear, on numerous occasions, the keywords in context which would aid them to transfer new words into "active" vocabulary instead of "passive".

- Officially document moments of Learner Voice more precisely, so the evolution of the project can be far smoother and tailored to the most recent feelings of the learners.

- Ensuring that a far greater volume of learners are actively listening to the recordings from the QR codes and, perhaps, officially formalising a sophisticated method of recording participation data which we can use to inform us of the most effective way to deliver new "high-register, low-frequency" vocabulary to future years' learners.

# REFERENCES

Education Training Foundation (2021). *Developing High Level Vocabulary*, London: ETF.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: The Project Team

| Project Role | Name | Job Role | Contact |
|---|---|---|---|
| Project Lead | Sophie Smithdale | Programme Leader of English | Sophie.smithdale@reaseheath.ac.uk |
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| Project Team | Andy Smith | Programme Leader of Animal Management | Andrew.Smith@reaseheath.ac.uk |
| | Vicky Tomlinson | Programme Leader of Maths | Victoria.Tomlinson@reaseheath.ac.uk |
| Mentor | Catherine McPartland | Mentor | cpmcpartland@gmail.com |
| Research Group Lead | Gail Lydon | RGL | gaillydon@me.com |

## Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

### Student A

A learner who has achieved one of the lower grades in the early assessments conducted at the beginning of the academic year. Also, an incredibly diligent student who completes all the work that is presented in lessons; however, they do have quite a limited range of vocabulary in comparison to some of their peers. This is clearly illustrated in the sizeable amounts of writing Student A produces on a consistent basis. Student A is from a relatively poor catchment area, thus arguably having less chance of an unbarred access to resources and technologies. They also have some barriers to learning, often manifesting in frequent, low-level disruptions. Overall, though, Student A consistently demonstrates excellent behaviour. These parameters were all contributing factors to why Student A was asked if they would participate in the project.

### "Initial Assessments" completed by Learner A at the beginning and end of the project



Figure 7. "Initial Assessment" completed by Learner A at the beginning of the project.



Figure 7. "Initial Assessment" completed by Learner A at the end of the project.

**Student B**

One of the stronger learners in the class, achieving one of the highest grades in the class after the early assessment in the academic year. In their work they clearly demonstrate that they possess a range of vocabulary significantly wider than their peers; however, they sometimes use the aforementioned either incorrectly, or in fragile grammatical structures. Student B is from a similar catchment area to Student A, they have no barriers to learning and they consistently demonstrate superb behaviour. These parameters, when compared with those of Student A, were some reasons why Student B was asked if they would participate in the project.

**"Initial Assessments" completed by Learner B at the beginning and end of the project**



Figure 8. "Initial Assessment" completed by Learner B at the beginning of the project.

Figure 9. "Initial Assessment" completed by Learner B at the end of the project.

## Appendix 3: Examples of Learners' Work

As you can see in the examples of each learner's work, both have started introducing some of the keywords into their writing for Q5 on Paper 2 – an article-writing task in which learners need to make sure their answer is persuasive.



*Figure 10. An example of learner work created during the project.*



*Figure 11. A second example of learner work using key vocabulary.*

**Appendix 4: Interview Questions**

1. How helpful have you found the introduction of the Words of the Week?

2. How much of a difference do you think they have made?

3. Have you actually used any of the Words of the Week outside of the classroom e.g., in conversations, when you've done writing at home?

4. Do you take the OTLA Word of the Week on the bookmark out of the book on your own accord or do you need to be reminded to do it?

5. Do you think the OTLA Word of the Week bookmarks have been effective/useful? How?

6. Do you think there is a more effective way in which we can introduce key words and their meanings to you?

7. How could we do this?

*Figure 12. Interview questions.*

These questions were asked to the learners twice, in addition to the initial assessment being given to the learners twice. We wanted to find out if there were any significant alterations in the learners' answers and attitudes towards the interview questions and initial assessment in comparison to what was given at the beginning of the project.

# Appendix 5: Project Resources

## Appendix 5.1 Initial Assessment Activity

Learners were asked to circle how confident they felt about each of the keywords, what they thought the word meant and then asked to write each word in a sentence.



*Figure 13. Initial assessment activity.*

## Appendix 5.2 Word Search and Matching Activity



*Figure 14. Wordsearch activity.*

The wordsearch activity learners were given in which they were exposed to the keywords we focused on in the project, and a synonym for each one, too. Upon finding all the words, learners were then asked to match each key word with its retrospective synonym.

## Appendix 5.3: Example Oracy Poster



*Figure 15. One of the oracy posters developed for the project.*

One of our key word posters: the key word is illustrated, in addition to the definitions it has (depending on context) and a QR code to an audio recording. Upon accessing this, learners can hear the word, its definition, and an example of it in context. It is worth noting that, purely for the sake of experimentation, we had a wider variety of staff as possible speaking in each recording to see whether or not learners preferred a particular voice. It transpired that there was no specific preference preferred by the learners.

**Appendix 5.4 Key Word bookmark**

Learners were provided with these at the beginning of the academic year for a reference tool, especially for when learners were working on creative writing tasks.

**word up**

curious

daunting

defiant

extraordinary

immense

majestic

perilous

piercing

triumphant

vulnerable

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## Appendix 6: Examples of other learners' Work

Evidence of learners, taught by another lecturer, using the words 'perilous', 'defiant', 'majestic', 'extraordinary' and 'immense' autonomously in their work without promptings either from the lecturer or the bookmark. Granted, from some learners, the words they have endeavoured to use have not quite been used correctly; however, it is pleasing to see that they are autonomously trying to integrate such language into their responses.



*Figure 16. Examples of learner work embedding key vocabulary.*

## Appendix 7: Feedback from Colleagues

### Feedback from Animal Management colleague

'Learners have been accepting of word of the week. They are used to this concept from Animal Management.'

### Feedback from English colleague

'Learners really seem to really like [words of the week]. They love all the different activities and can see the relevance of knowing a bank of sophisticated vocab to be able to use in their writing. Learns are also able to, without prompting, use perilous in the activity from this afternoon. The word majestic was recalled/used when thinking of the word to describe the mountain range on the "immense" PowerPoint slide.'

### Feedback from Maths colleague (1)

'I have been using it in all my lessons and have added this to my lesson slides (I will use it in L3 core maths too, just because I can!). I would say that the learners that have responded to it best are my KS4 learners. I find that the GCSE learners tend to put it in a generic sentence ('I find all of maths daunting') whereas the KS4 learners were much more on board with it and talked about how maths made them feel and how they could make things 'less daunting'. I don't know if that's because they are a different type of learner, as I find them a lot keener to learn than resit learners.'

### Feedback from maths colleague (2)

'In my lesson we listened to one of the audio recordings of a word of the week after a learner randomly scanned the QR code with their phone. They were really positive about it and found it quite entertaining to listen to as well.'

## Appendix 6: Participants and Stakeholders

| No of learners? | 30 | No of staff? | 14 |
|---|---|---|---|
| No of organisations? | 1 | No of employers/ stakeholders? | 1 |

## Appendix 7: Research/ Evaluation Approach

| **Participant/observer** (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs) | | **Interview/survey** (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews) | X |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Observation of practice** (in person, video, observation notes) | X | **Document analysis** (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies) | X |
| **Custom test/assessment** (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention' | X | **High-stakes learner assessment** (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs | |
| **Before/after assessment** (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation) | X | **Comparative trial** (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group | |
| **Other** (specify): | Action Research. | | |

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