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Implementing strategies to foster vocabulary acquisition: gains and challenges

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Abstract

This research study was carried out in a public institution in Medellin named Fundadores. It aimed to explore the gains and challenges students experienced while using vocabulary acquisition strategies. Data analysis suggests that students were able to build vocabulary and recognize some sentence patterns. To explore these gains and challenges, recordings, interviews, and reflections were used.

Keywords: Vocabulary acquisition strategies, vocabulary, vocabulary building.

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Degree Requirement

This research project was developed in a public school in Medellin Colombia during my teaching practicum in 2021 as a requirement to obtain my B. Ed Degree in Foreign Language Teaching at Universidad de Antioquia.

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Preface

This study was carried out in a public institution in Medellin Colombia as part of my teaching practicum. It took place from February to November 2021. As a preservice teacher, I was assigned to do this study there.

This report shares the description of the context and also the statement of the problem that was found after an observation period. Vocabulary acquisition strategies were used in order to foster students' understanding of some ways to acquire the skills they needed in order to do the required activities.

Context Description

Fundadores is a public school located in Medellín, Colombia. The school's vision is to educate leaders that excel in quality, academic training, inclusivity, humanitarian help, and mediation in conflict resolution. In addition, the school offers educational services at the levels of preschool, primary, basic secondary, academic high school, and technical high school.

Furthermore, this school intends to teach their students with a humanistic and inclusive model, in which the process is promoted through integrity and other values so that students can become leaders in their community—all of this, supported by the knowledge of science, technology, and life experiences through the social integration of a community that has been through violent times.

The seventh is a group of 26 students, split into two groups to uphold social distancing. Their English level can be described as some basic vocabulary. Although most of them seem eager to learn, most of them have issues following instructions in English and doing the activities in English. The cooperating teacher (CT) is a translation graduate with a specialization in teaching EFL, she has nearly 12 years of experience and believes that teaching grammar in an explicit way is not beneficial for the students and attempts to avoid it as much as possible.

The course syllabus is based on the DBA (derechos básicos de aprendizaje) of Colombia and is divided into a series of planned classes that are available to the students two weeks in advance or less via the school's webpage. These guides are prepared by another teacher and the CT uses them in all her classes. These guides contain a series of activities, video links, and explanations designed to study by themselves if they are unable to attend school. Moreover,

students go to school for in-person classes once or twice per month and have virtual sessions (which are not recorded) the week after the in-person sessions. As for the, the group was divided in two and both locations have TV sets that are not available for class use because of technical issues.

The teacher-researcher is a 39-year-old student at the University of Antioquia who primarily wants to help the students learn English while he writes a paper in which he records this research experience.

Problem Statement

Wilkins (1972) stated that «Learning vocabulary is learning how words relate to external reality and how they relate to one another». To put it differently, words have functions in the world; they mean something to real people in a context. One cannot master a language without knowing the multiple meanings of words and what those words do to each other in different contexts.

In the case of this group of seventh-grade students, they are taught vocabulary through readings, translation processes, and games such as hangman. They are supposed to use the taught vocabulary to produce written texts such as digital wall newspapers and also to answer reading comprehension crosswords. At the end of the class, they do not share what their productions are with the rest of the class.

This group has both face-to-face and virtual sessions and they usually consist of 1) the CT reading the guide, explaining each part in English and in Spanish, 2) reading a list of keywords or vocabulary for the session and translating it to one meaning in Spanish, 3) reproducing one or more videos displayed in the guide 4) explaining the outcome (reading comprehension translation or written text) to be rendered, 5) playing a game such as hangman or a crossword, and in the next session they usually repeat the process in a less detailed manner.

They sometimes have two sessions per week, and they use a guide which is designed as if the students were unable to attend class, and so they would only have to send the outcomes described in the guide, and that is enough to complete their duties. The vocabulary they are to learn relates to topics such as Earth Day, Saint Valentine's Day, Woman's Day, sports, news articles, etc, with little or no existing guided practice of using words they need before to create the written tasks. On the other hand, the teacher has told them to use imagery, (Personal interview

2021, April 5) so they can have an image of words in their minds, they do little use of images or contextualized learning of the vocabulary, or vocabulary recycling, and they are left to fend by themselves to render the final product of the task. Even more, they change the theme every time they change to a new guide, meaning no vocabulary recycling. The absence of vocabulary recycling was evidenced after three sessions (Journal # 3 April 2021). The vocabulary focus shifted from a digital wall newspaper to earth day, and no connection was made for recycling the vocabulary. In addition, each pedagogical guide lasts for two sessions. Even more, their class was spent on sharing what the pedagogical guide is about and translating the vocabulary list, with little or no implementation. As a consequence, a) students do not have the chance of relating one word to the other(s) depending on the context; and b) they do not have the chance of using the same word with different functions in the same context (Personal communication, April 5, 2021).

For students learn vocabulary, it is precise to give them tasks that are abundantly exemplified and practiced before students' production. Students can develop these tasks better if they are taught vocabulary learning strategies that show them that words coexist with other words inside a context (Wilkins, 1972).

In that trend of ideas, Richards (1976), assumes that for students to gain lexical competence, 1) they should learn that words used in a particular order and that have a specific meaning; and 2) a word can have multiple meanings. Thus, as teachers, it is recommended to apply strategies according to these generalities.

The proposed strategies that were to be used to comply with Richards are found in The Training & Technical Assistance Center (2015) proposal to teach vocabulary. To achieve this, they can use the following strategies: "Scavenger Hunt" and "WordsAlive".

The research question of this paper is what are the gains and challenges of implementing vocabulary acquisition strategies in the seventh grade of a public institution?

Theoretical Framework

In this section starts with a definition of vocabulary acquisition and then goes through its history. Additionally, there are some examples of advantages and disadvantages of vocabulary acquisition.

Defining Vocabulary Acquisition

Wilkins (1972) stated that «Learning vocabulary is learning how words relate to external reality and how they relate to one another, » understanding that a word can have many meanings. Through understanding those meanings in context is that we can learn about a word. Or paraphrasing Suarez & Varela (2002), learning a word in isolation is a waste of time. Going a step further, Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), as cited by Sydow (2015), propose the Involvement Load Hypothesis, where learners' engagement in establishing the meaning of newly encountered vocabulary is paramount for acquisition. Such an ideal environment passes through three characteristics to become a reality, a) need: “signifies the motivation to understand or use a word”. b) search: “draws on the concept of noticing and signifies the attention paid by students to find out the meaning of a word. This is done by turning to a dictionary or by consulting an authority”, and c) evaluation: “occurs when the learner has to make a syntactic and semantic choice between words, contrasting them for precision.”

Laufer (1991), in more or less words, emphasizes that if such conditions exist, the involvement load is naturally augmented, and so do the chances of acquiring target vocabulary. And, as argued by Hedge (2000), as cited in Sydow (2015), in short, states that there can be adverse effects on clarity and fluency when there is an evident lack of vocabulary, in contrast when there is insufficient grammatical knowledge.

Evolution of Vocabulary Acquisition (VA) and Specific Vocabulary Acquisition Strategies to be Used

Ever since humanity has needed to expedite learning a language, there have been numerous attempts to be efficient. The oldest example can be the Rosetta Stone, and since modern pedagogy was born with the midst of Comenius' head, there have been more attempts to perfect the process of understanding the classics from the source, for instance, the Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English (1881). We can also find more cataloged examples in Oxford university, including books with titles as Teaching Reading Skills (1988), Working with Words (1989), Teaching reading skills in a foreign language (1988), and The Pictorial English dictionary (1985). And with time, Krashen's definition of acquisition in the 1980s started to describe the meaning of acquisition in language learning.

The Training & Technical Assistance Center (2015) made a recompilation of recommendations to follow when teaching vocabulary: 1) Choose the most frequent words used; 2) Do not use uncommon words; 3) Choose terms that are essential to understand the texts; 4) address critical concepts of the chapters or readings.

In addition, Richards (1976) states that for students to gain lexical competence: 1) they should learn that words used in a particular order have a specific meaning. For this, students may draw on two strategies proposed by the Training & Technical Assistance Center (2015). 2) A word can have multiple meanings. For this, students may draw on three strategies, proposed by the Training & Technical Assistance Center (2015).

a) Word Map. In this strategy, students focus on three questions, "What is it?" "What is it like?" and "What are some examples?" to make students pay attention to the types of information that make up a "definition" and the way that information is arranged. b) "Scavenger Hunt". In

this strategy, the teacher gives students the target vocabulary of the cycle, students search in different sources for the word being used, describe the context and make a poster to present it. And finally, c) “WordsAlive”. In this strategy, students describe many characteristics of a keyword, by means of a provided chart.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary acquisition is challenging for many reasons, as Laufer (2000) described there is at least a clear need for long-term dedication and sustainable strategies and practice. However, the system demands short-term results. Nevertheless, Ellis (2000) assures that by comprehensible input and repetition, the short-term results demanded by the system can be obtained.

Vocabulary acquisition strategies are set to repeat, recycle, and give parameters for students to come up with a tangible result. That seems fairly teacher-oriented, but it has shown positive results. A) Shintani (2012), as cited by Sydow (2015) describes that students had to negotiate with language more than the teacher had expected; B) Ellis et al. (1994) found that students were in control of their learning process. Also, C) Sydow (2015) describes how several researchers used, what seemed to be decontextualized vocabulary activities to the untrained eye, alongside more communicative parts of the classes to aid with time efficiency issues and reading proficiency.

Research Methodology

The present research was drawn on a single intrinsic case study as proposed by Yin (2011). A case study allows to learn about a phenomenon in a specific context. To do this, the researcher may turn to several data sources to have a better understanding of the particularities of the case itself (Yin, 2011).

Likewise, this research methodology allowed the researcher to observe a phenomenon: the gains and challenges of implementing vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon in its specific context: a seventh-grade course in a public institution in Medellín. Besides, it used different data sources, such as: reflections, journals, recordings, interviews to study this phenomenon.

Data Collection

To observe the gains and challenges experienced by students during vocabulary acquisition strategies, this research used reflections, journals, recordings, student work samples and interviews.

Reflection

With one reflection before the proposed actions and one after each session. Reflections allowed to understand the previous vocabulary acquisition strategies that the students implemented before the implementation of the new ones, and to what extent these later ones help students or not in the process.

Journals

Journals allowed to document the researcher's view of students use of the strategies during the implementation. These views were triangulated with the other data sources to find recurrences.

Student Work Samples

Work samples allowed to go deeper into the answers the student provide in the reflections and the researcher impressions in the journals. Student work samples were taken at the end of each implementation.

Interviews

Interviews helped to understand how students felt after the whole process of implementation,as well as their perspectives on how the process affected the way they learn vocabulary.

Action Development and Data Analysis

To teach students, the strategies, the teacher had to do the following procedure: First, the teacher introduced the strategy and explained students how it worked. Second, the teacher showed the structure of the worksheet to the students, i.e., he showed each part and division of the worksheet and the purpose of it in the lesson. Third, modeling. The teacher demonstrated how to use the strategy with at least three examples of what the students had to accomplish. Fourth, the students developed the strategy by themselves, and lastly, they shared their product with the rest of the course.

In order to analyze data, a deductive approach was used. All data was read to look for emerging categories that represented either gains or challenges (use of dictionary and vocabulary building). Finally, all data sources were triangulated to confirm or disconfirm these findings.

Findings

Data analysis suggested that after implementing these two strategies, students experienced some gains such as being able to recognize some sentence patterns in order to do further activities. Additionally, students were able to learn words by identifying them and representing them in different ways. This analysis also suggested that students may experience some stumbling blocks such as finding it difficult to use a dictionary to follow the strategy to learn the due vocabulary.

Gains

Sentence Structure

This gain refers to the fact that students were able to notice patterns in the structure of a sentence (subject, verb, complement), and they exploited that knowledge to do further activities. At least 11 students had this gain. An example of this is Pepito’s work,

Scavenger Hunt
Going to the Restaurant

Student name: _____ Date: _____

Objectives

At the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- ★ Identify the function of a word in a sentence.
- ★ Ask and answer questions about the functions of a word in a sentence.

Instructions

1. Determina la función de las palabras numeradas en el texto según la posición que ocupan en la oración.
2. Pon la palabra en el cuadro en el lugar adecuado según su función en la oración.
3. Socializa con tu profesor y compañeros tus respuestas.

MODELING: What function does *first* have in the sentence?
Restaurant is a subject

Restaurants¹ are² great places to have a good time³. If you like them, I have the following suggestions for you:

First, your friends and you⁴ must⁵ make a reservation⁶. This saves you all an unnecessary queue. Second, many restaurants⁷ have⁸ their menus online⁹ and you can check these menus in advance, so you do not lose time in the place.

Third, we all¹⁰ have¹¹ different likes and dislikes about food¹² so you need to make sure that the restaurant¹³ is¹⁴ appropriate¹⁵ for all of you. And, finally, fourth, we all need good space to eat so make sure the table is big enough.

You¹⁶ have¹⁷ the chance to have a good or a bad experience in a restaurant¹⁸, but this also depends on you. What else can you suggest?

Word #	Subject	Verb	Complement
1	Restaurants		
2		Are	
3			restplaces
4	your friends eat you		
5		must	
6			make
7	many		
8		have	
9			their menus online
10	we all		
11		have	
12			different like ord dishes ke about
13	more sure ¹³ at the restauran		
14		is	
15			Appropriate
16	you		
17		have	
18			the chance

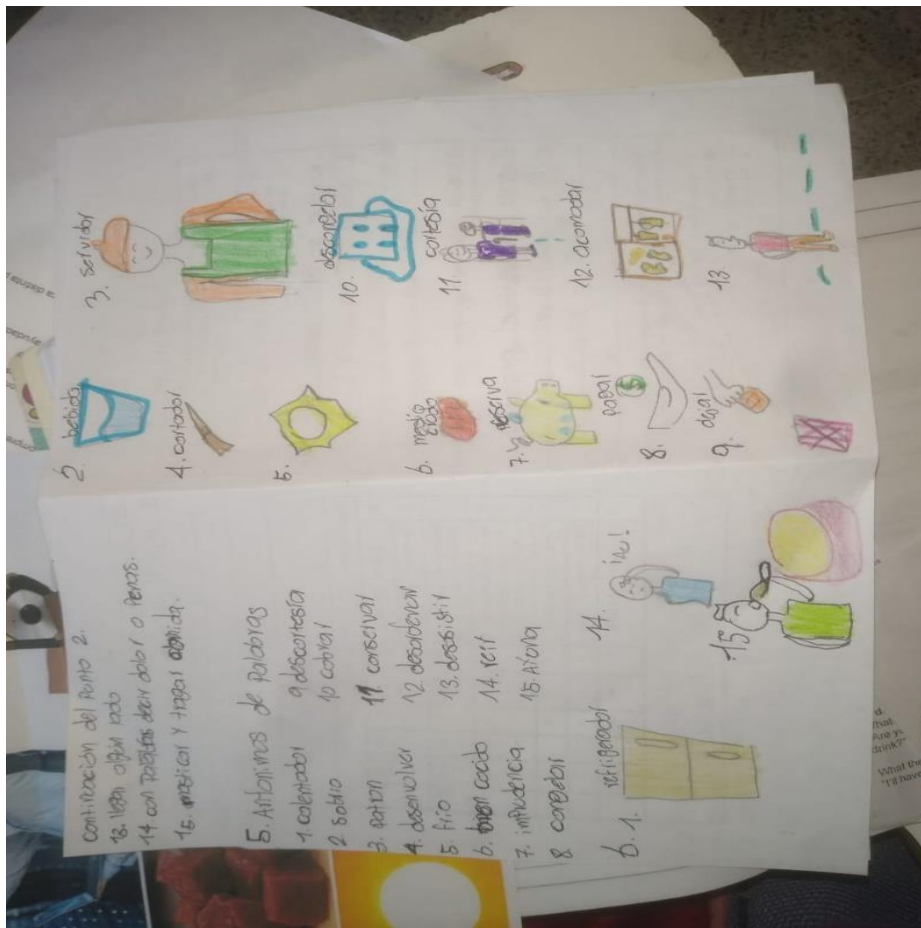
As can be seen, Pepito classified the selected words in the text according to their function (subject, verb, and complement). And, after finishing this activity related to the strategy Scavenger Hunt, he said,

Teacher, the strategy was very useful because I could put the different elements of the sentence in a chart to understand their function (Interview, 25/10/2021, my translation).

Pepito realized that breaking down the sentence into chunks helped him understand their function in the text he was reading.

Vocabulary Building

This gain refers to the fact that students were able to create different connections proposed in the strategy WordsAlive to learn new vocabulary. At least 11 students had this gain. An example of this is Maria's work:



As can be seen, María was able to relate words to an image and their translation from Google Translator in order to remember them easily. After completing the activity, she said,

Teacher, I wouldn't change anything about the activity because it is a good way to understand the language that you taught us. (Interview, 25/10/2021, my translation)

María understood that not only Google Translator was a proficient strategy for her to learn new vocabulary, but also, she could use this strategy WordsAlive to learn new vocabulary.

Strategy Efficacy Awareness

Students were able to see, by the strategies, that it is more efficient to learn vocabulary using a set of strategies rather than just the dictionary. One student told in an interview that she was more aware of how to learn a word after explaining that more ways of exploring a word was better:

Using various ways of exploring a word is how one learns... I can say using the dictionary is a five out of ten to learn a word, but the strategies would be a ten out of ten (Interview, 24/11/2021, my translation).

This way, the student realized that the gains of using more than one strategy outperform the use of just the dictionary. This also can be seen throughout students' reflections, as students stated:

“I didn't strain myself and learned a lot” (reflection sept 24)

Also, implying that more context to understand a word was less stressing for the process of understanding a word.

Challenges

Pattern Identification

This challenge refers to the fact that even though students were able to use the strategy to accomplish the structural part of the activity, they did not go beyond that. At least 4 students experienced this challenge. An example of this is Monica's answer,

2. Nombre Monica Lopez Grupo 7-7A

1. ¿Hasta qué punto, la estrategia WorldMap te enseñó que las palabras usadas en un orden específico tienen un significado diferente? Hasta que terminamos

Totalmente Bastante No sabría decirlo Me confunde No me enseñó nada

2. ¿Hasta que punto esta estrategia te ayudó a mejorar tu vocabulario? Hasta que ya comprendimos

3. ¿Tuviste dificultades a la hora de implementar la estrategia?
¿Cuáles? Si o no entender

4. ¿Qué vocabulario aprendiste en esta clase?
ingles

5. ¿Qué te ayudó a aprender ese vocabulario?
las estrategias

Many students like this one had good performance in the structural part of the activities but did not understand the language that was presented to them for other purposes, as if learning a strategy on how to pass an exam without understanding the content.

Dictionary Use

This challenge refers to the fact that students found it difficult to use a dictionary to complete the assigned activities since they did not know dictionary conventions. At least 6 students experienced this difficulty. An example of this is Maria. After being asked if she would like a class dedicated to learning how to use the dictionary, she answered,

Teacher, it would be a good idea to give the students a class on how to use the dictionary, because the dictionary confuses me. I rather use Google Translate because it is faster. I even get confused in what part of the dictionary I'm at (Interview, 19/10/2021, my translation).

As can be seen, it was hard for Maria to use a bilingual dictionary because she did not know the conventions to use it or to tell which part she was at. During another class, the teacher could observe the following,

In a particular situation, Juanito was asking me to help him find a word. Meanwhile, another student showed him the answer. He was unable to see the answer because the word had an adverbial termination in bold letters and was located after the stem word (Journal # 3, 11/10/2021)

It is evidenced that Juanito had difficulties seeing how the dictionary was organized to save space and have an order by placing the suffixes of words after the stem words. This confused him as to how to use the dictionary properly.

Conclusions and Reflections

The gains and challenges of implementing vocabulary acquisition strategies in a seventh grade in a public institution were unexpected for the writer of this paper, since students achieved different results, at least at the beginning. Although vocabulary building was a given, the efficacy of the strategy going beyond vocabulary learning and focusing on completing the activity and accomplishing identifying the identification of a sentence, without centering on the meaning, was a surprise, because they were to learn vocabulary, not a strategy to not have to learn it. Though, with time some students started to embrace the activities to center their learning to understanding a word, it was seen that many compensated the lack of knowledge through the recognition of patterns in the structures, not the words themselves. On the other hand, some students their own way of using the dictionary, but it was not very successful, nor they got how the dictionary was structured. And, for some similar reasons, students did not perform well on the activities and resorted to copying from other classmates, as seen in their copied mistakes.

These finding are important for at least 3 reasons. First, students take time to learn that the strategies are useful because some of them are not used to learning strategies that require them to not define a word with the immediate translation, and do not believe they will boost their learning experience.

Second, many students are not aware of how to use the dictionary and there should be a period of exploration and familiarization before starting the process of vocabulary building. This means it is recommended to give students well structured lessons on dictionary conventions and use.

Third, some students might desire to learn, but they might have been in a process in which they were not asked to think, but to memorize vocabulary and structures. These vocabulary

exploration strategies are designed to have students think about a word and make a mental image, rather than a translation.

In times like this, students get disconnected from reality, their mindset has to be repurposed and reoriented to fill their emotional and academic needs. Sometimes when you are in distress you lose the view of the general picture. I realized that some students were more eager to learn if they knew what they could use L2 for, and some students even told me that they did not want to learn until I explained the usefulness of L2 for their future.

I personally would have liked to ask the coordinator for the plans that would interfere with teaching at the beginning of each bimester. It would have help me a lot to relieve some stress caused by not being able to collect data as soon as possible.

Finally, I was not unaffected by the fact that some students eat only what the school supplies for them, and that the pandemic made them regress into a less balanced meal. I was not counting on the loss of time that meals would have in my project. Too bad, it was a lesson to be learned because I had planned to implement more strategies if I could.

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Appendix A

Session	Duration: 100 minutes	Strategy: Word Map
Section: Previous		Duration: (20 minutes)
What the teacher does: instructing for students to understand what they are going to create. Modeling		What the students do: Brainstorm about the kind of menu they would want to create
Section: While		Duration: 40 minutes
What the teacher does: Introduce the characteristics of Word Map and give a clear example of what students will create		What the students do: In pairs, create a menu to offer in a restaurant and be able to describe its characteristics
Section: After		Duration: 40 minutes
What the teacher does: Assessing the veracity of the description of the menu and the use of the strategy		What the students do: Present in oral form a menu to offer in a restaurant and its characteristics
Affordances: Dictionary and/or Internet		
Session	Duration: 50 minutes	Strategy: Scavenger Hunt
Section: Previous		Duration: 10 minutes
What the teacher does: Present the strategy, the use of a word according to the most basic grammar category. Choose the list of words. Modeling		What the students do: Pay attention to the instructions and form pairs.
Section: While		Duration: 30 minutes
What the teacher does: Provide a model and texts for the students that don't have a computer at home.		What the students do: Browse the web for the words or search in the given texts, Showing the words in a sentence, interacting

		with other words.
Section: After		Duration: 20 minutes
What the teacher does: Assessment		What the students do: Present a written inform about what the words were doing in the sentences.
Affordances: Reading and/or internet		
Session	Duration: 60 minutes	Strategy: WordsAlive
Section: Previous		Duration: 20 minutes
What the teacher does: Present the students with the model and the list of words they are going to analyze. Modeling		What the students do: take notes and ask for clarification.
Section: While		Duration: 20 minutes
What the teacher does: Provide students with support.		What the students do: In pairs, apply the strategy to the list of provided words.
Section: After		Duration: 20 minutes
What the teacher does: Listen or read to the presentation and provide feedback.		What the students do: socialization of the findings.
Affordances: Format for students to use, dictionary and or internet		

Appendix B

Same word different subject
Going to the Restaurant

Student name:

Date:

Objectives

At the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- ★ Understand a word through the use of a dictionary.
- ★ Be more proficient looking in the dictionary.
- ★ Understand what the words on the list mean.
- ★ Explain the words using more than translation.

Instructions:

1. Search for the meaning of the words on the list
2. Write what you think the word means.
3. Write what does the dictionary says it means
4. Write your own definition based on what you understood.
5. Look for other words that mean the same thing
6. Look for words that have the opposite meaning.
7. Make a drawing of the word
8. Look on the internet for images of the words (homework)
9. Prepare a short presentation at the end of the class to share your chart. Get ready to explain.
10. Use the back of the copies to answer.

1. Refrigerator	9. Politeness
2. Beverage	10. Pay
3. Server	11. Leave
4. Cutter	12. Accommodate
5. Warm	13. Attend
6. Undercooked	14. Complain
7. Reservation	15. Eat
8. Defrost	

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Scavenger Hunt
Going to the Restaurant

Student name:

Date:

Objectives

At the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- ★ Identify the function of a word in a sentence.
- ★ Ask and answer questions about the functions of a word in a sentence.

Instructions

1. Determina la función de las palabras numeradas en el texto según la posición que ocupan en la oración.
2. Pon la palabra en el cuadro en el lugar adecuado según su función en la oración.
3. Socializa con tu profesor y compañeros tus respuestas.

MODELING: What function does *first* have in the sentence?

Restaurant is a subject

Restaurants¹ are² great places to have a good time³. If you like them, I have the following suggestions for you:

First, your friends and you⁴ must⁵ make a reservation⁶. This saves you all an unnecessary queue. Second, many restaurants⁷ have⁸ their menus online⁹ and you can check these menus in advance, so you do not lose time in the place.

Third, we all¹⁰ have¹¹ different likes and dislikes about food¹² so you need to make sure that the restaurant¹³ is¹⁴ appropriate¹⁵ for all of you. And, finally, fourth, we all need good space to eat so make sure the table is big enough.

You¹⁶ have¹⁷ the chance to have a good or a bad experience in a restaurant¹⁸, but this also depends on you. What else can you suggest?

Word #	Subject	Verb	Complement
1	Restaurants		
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			