

## THE BOY IN THE DRESS: DIGITAL WAYS OF TEACHING VOCABULARY IN SEK-I CLASSROOMS

Cet article aborde l'apprentissage du vocabulaire à l'aide d'outils digitaux et montre que la technologie peut être intégrée avec succès au développement de la littératie. En examinant le livre « The Boy in the Dress » de David Williams, les auteurs démontrent que l'apprentissage axé sur le numérique peut permettre d'accroître l'apprentissage incidentel du vocabulaire grâce à une lecture intensive. L'analyse de ce récit fournit aux enseignants des outils et des stratégies utiles pour l'assimilation du vocabulaire.

● Gustav Arnold, Irene Althaus, Marie-Nicole Bossart, Katharina Fischer & Simone Ries  
| PH Luzern

Vocabulary plays a pivotal role in foreign language teaching and learning. Modern approaches to vocabulary acquisition emphasize, among other things, that words are psychologically coded (Crossley, Kyle, & Salsbury, 2016), that they are transmitted in clusters rather than isolated items (Ellis, 2017), and that they have to be used in real-life settings (Eskildson, 2018). Despite the multidimensional and complex nature of vocabulary acquisition (Kim, Crossley, & Kyle, 2018), there is consensus as to what constitutes good vocabulary teaching and learning.

Firstly, successful vocabulary learning requires that a word be introduced and tackled properly. Nation (2013) posits that attention must be paid to both auditory and visual form of word (phonetics and semiotics), the position it occupies in a phrase or collocation (syntax and morphology), the meaning a word conceptually and associatively conveys (semantics), and the function it assumes in everyday discourse (pragmatics). Similarly, Cameron stresses the dynamic na-

ture of vocabulary learning by proposing a five-step approach (2001) predicated, likewise, upon form, position, function, and use.

Secondly, successful vocabulary learning also requires that a word must be encountered on numerous occasions (Harmon et al., 2009) and dealt with in a great variety of contexts (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). It involves the use of 4 skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and it plays out at different linguistic and interactive levels (Kasper & Wagner, 2018).

With the advent of technology-enhanced and digitally-oriented applications, unprecedented opportunities are generated for learners to appropriate lexical units in a highly individualized manner (Webb and Nation, 2017).

In the following article, we are examining ways of dealing with new vocabulary at the level of B1 based upon technology- and web-based tools in an attempt

to effectively integrate technology into literacy development. We are adopting, implicitly, Nation's approach and propose tools that cater specifically to three phases of vocabulary learning, namely **selection, presentation and practice**, as proposed by Hutz (2018). The author argues that specific lexical items need to be selected judiciously (frequency, semantic range, relevance, and learnability), introduced properly (verbal and non-verbal techniques through syntagmatic and paradigmatic associations) and practiced productively (meaning, form and use) for learners to progressively expand their semantic and pragmatic knowledge of a language.

By examining closely **David Walliams' *The Boy in the Dress***, we seek to demonstrate how digitally-oriented learning serves to stimulate learners' vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading. The analysis of this narrative provides teachers with useful tools and strategies as to how vocabulary learning can be effectuated in- and outside the classroom.

*The Boy in the Dress* is designed and written for children, complemented with numerous illustrations by Quentin Blake. In terms of content, the narrative provides numerous themes that can be explored in Secondary I (grade 7-9) settings—gender stereotypes, gender roles, gender-specific clothing, identity, fashion, bullying, diversity, friendship etc. Overall, these topics are intricately bound up with identity formation and thus constitute a good starting point for further activities and projects in the classroom.

The main protagonists of *The Boy in the Dress* are the two brothers, John and Dennis. Their parents divorced when Dennis, the younger of the two, was 7 years of age. He sorely misses his mother and remembers her by a yellow dress that she used to wear. Dennis takes it upon himself to purchase the same dress at a local shop after spotting it in a *Vogue* magazine. When his father discovers the magazine, however, he furiously reacts to his son's interest. His brother even goes so far and calls him "Denise", creating for him, incidentally, a persona that becomes increasingly significant in the narrative.

It will be demonstrated how digital tools can be used to enhance learners' vocabulary learning while reading the book *The Boy in the Dress*. The teacher's role consists mainly in stimulating and monitoring the use of digital tools so that, in the long run, strategic knowledge can be acquired for further reading practice.

### Ideas for practice

This section will demonstrate how digital tools can be used to enhance learners' vocabulary learning while reading the book *The Boy in the Dress*. The teacher's role consists mainly in stimulating and monitoring the use of digital tools so that, in the long run, strategic knowledge can be acquired for further reading practice. As mentioned above, we will follow the three steps of vocabulary learning proposed by Hutz (2018). Each step is followed by a concrete example.

#### Step 1: Selecting

Literature and especially the digital form **eBook** is a great resource for encountering new words. To select appropriate single words and multi-word expressions, four aspects are crucial: *frequency, semantic range, relevance, and learnability* (Hutz, 2018). The usefulness of selecting lexical items with high 'frequency' is obvious. 'Semantic range' refers to the meanings of a word and the contexts that it is used in. Some words can be used in many different contexts (e.g., good; a good day, a good experience, etc.), they have a broad semantic range and others are much more restricted (e.g., gorgeous). The criterion 'relevance' can be difficult as teachers have to predict the learners' future needs. The last aspect 'learnability' refers to the difficulties learners have regarding the meaning, form and use of words. These difficulties can vary among different learners.

Thirty lexical items were chosen in this study (brilliant, delight, full of sadness, etc.; see fig. 1). They are associated with the subtopic of 'identity' and selected according to the four above-mentioned aspects (frequency, semantic range, relevance, and learnability). As vocabulary learning is a very individual process,



Gustav Arnold, Irene Althaus, Marie-Nicole Bossart, Katharina Fischer and Simone Ries all work at the PH

Luzern in the English Department. They were all teachers at Primary or Secondary I/II level and now teach English Methodology and Literature/Linguistics for future Primary and Secondary School teachers.

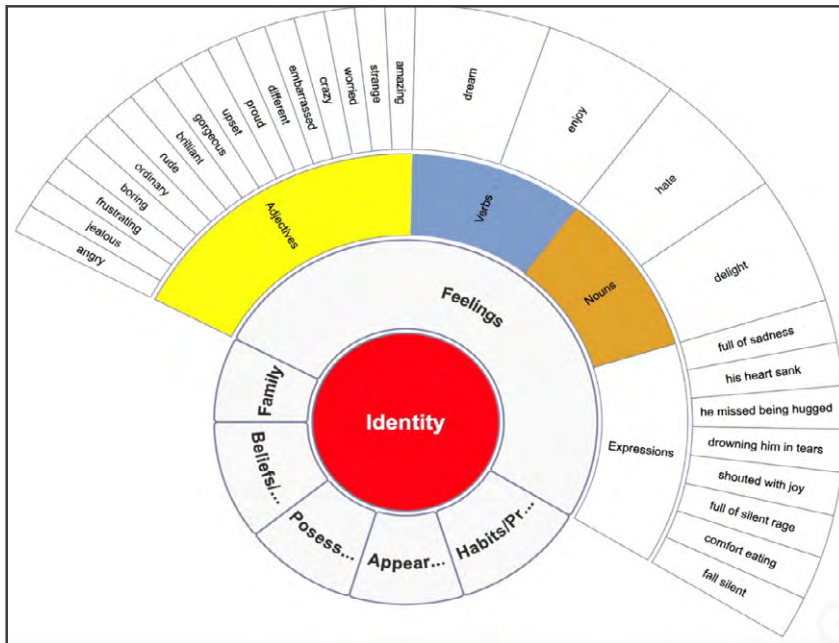


Fig. 1: Created with Edrawmind.com

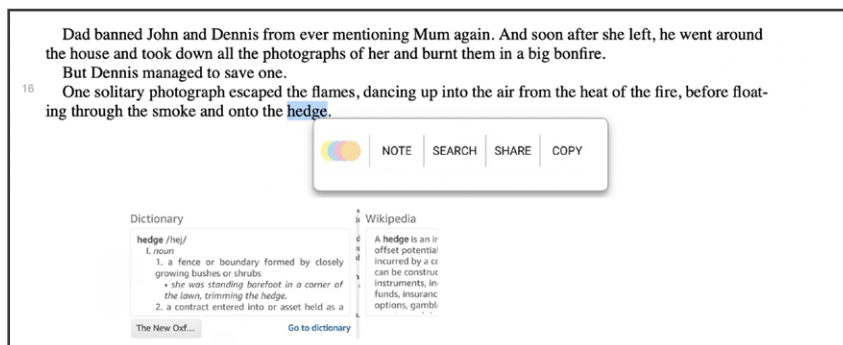


Fig. 2: Screenshots of eBook

selected lexical items should be complemented with individual vocabulary.

The following digital resources are for encountering new words (Ebooks, Films, Blogs, Newspapers, Youtube, Netflix, Tiktok, etc.)

## Step 2: Presenting

To connect the selected lexical items more quickly, words should be grouped. This activity can be done in two ways - either by the learners themselves, in which case semantic links can be explored autonomously or by the teacher, in which case premediated semantic choices are effectuated on linguistic grounds. The words need to be transferred properly into the mental lexicon by creating links to already existing lexical items. This can be achieved by integrating them into a topically- and semantically-oriented mind map. Definitions, synonyms, antonyms, pronunciation, for instance, can be added. Furthermore, verbal and non-verbal presentation techniques can be used or techniques that involve making references to the learners' L1 (e.g., false friends: become/bekommen). **With digital mind maps**, learners can easily change the design of the mind map (e.g., structure, colours, links) or add individual vocabulary.

Fig. 1 illustrates an example of a mind map with thirty selected words from the book *The Boy in the Dress*.

The following digital resources are conducive to creating mind maps: Edrawmind.com, mural.com

Learners will come across many new and unknown words while reading. Very helpful is that **eBook readers** such as Kindle provide the function of clicking on a word and supporting the presentation with pictures, definitions, translations, and pronunciation (see fig. 2)<sup>1</sup>.

Apart from Kindle there are other eBook readers such as Tolino, Pocket book etc.

## Literature and especially the digital form eBook is a great resource for encountering new words.

The main objective of vocabulary learning is to store words in the long-term memory. Thus, it is a good idea to adhere to the following principles: **connecting words**, **processing words in a multisensory manner**, **contextualizing words**, and **repeating words** (Hutz, 2018). The role of the teacher is to present words in topic-based networks, demonstrate lexical

<sup>1</sup> For differentiation/variation of classroom activities eBooks offer readers the possibility to listen to whole chapters.

relations (e.g. synonyms), provide visual, auditory or kinaesthetic support, use authentic texts, revise vocabulary, etc.

Microsoft Forms (see fig. 3) is a tool that supports the above-mentioned principles and allows learners to create questions, add pictures, watch videos or use links. Similar to Kindle Reader, Microsoft Forms includes an immersive reader (reading passages aloud, providing definitions, translations, pictures, etc.).

Another digital resource apart from Microsoft Forms is Google Forms.

### Step 3: Practicing

After encountering a new lexical item, learners need opportunities for *meaning-related, form-related and use-related practice*.

*Meaning-related practice:* There are numerous activities that focus on meaning of a word, for instance, games such as taboo or memory, matching pictures and words, categorizing expressions (Hutz, 2018). There is a variety of apps that can be used for focusing on *meaning-related practice* there. They offer learning aids such as flashcards, games, etc. Activities that can be done are interactive (e.g., matching words such as synonyms and antonyms). The following example (fig. 4; [www.learningapps.org](http://www.learningapps.org)) illustrates what this can look like:

There are other digital resources for meaning-related practice such as [quizlet.com](http://quizlet.com), [wordwall.com](http://wordwall.com), [kahoot.com](http://kahoot.com), and tools provided by the course books with digital additions.

*Form-related practice:* To practice grammatical aspects, spelling or pronunciation, the following activities can be helpful: reconstruction exercises (see fig. 5), crosswords, pronunciation drills (Hutz, 2018). There is a variety of apps that can be used for focusing on *form-related practice* (pronunciation, spelling or grammar). The following example (fig. 5) illustrates how learners can explicitly practice word order:

There are other digital resources for form-related practice such as [quizlet.com](http://quizlet.com) or [learningapps.org](http://learningapps.org).

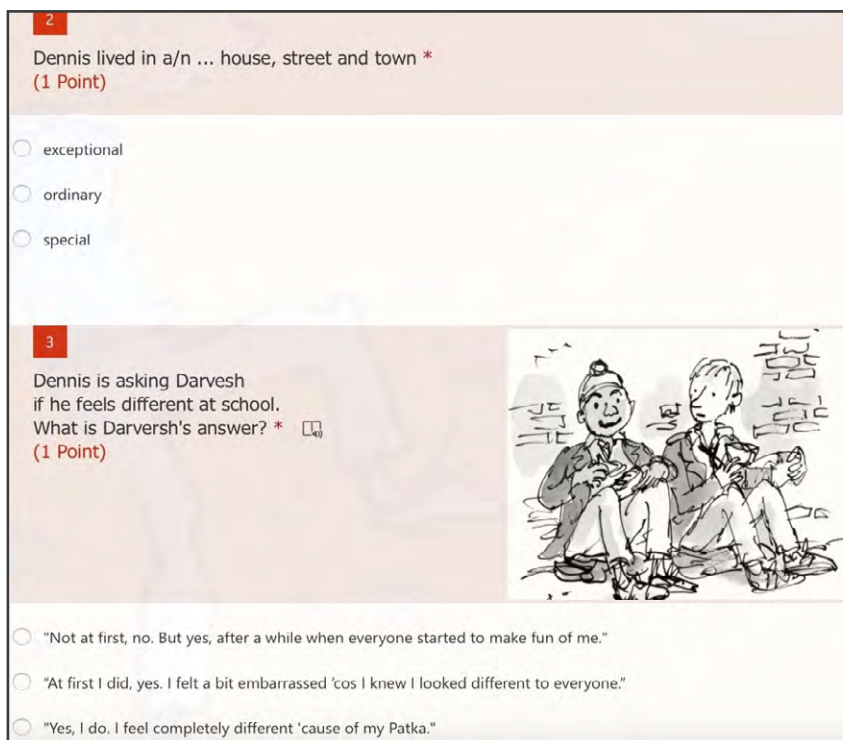


Fig. 3: Screenshot of Microsoft Forms

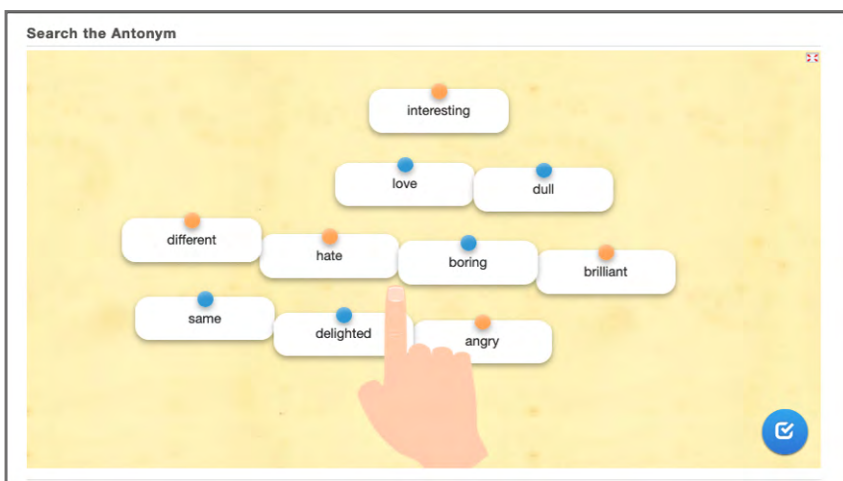


Fig. 4: Screenshot of [www.learningapps.org](http://www.learningapps.org)

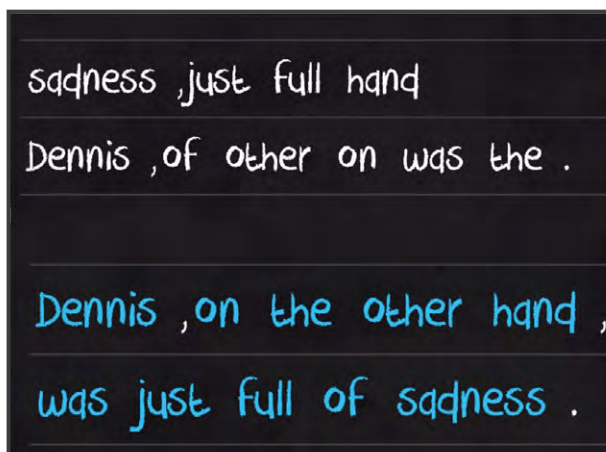


Fig. 5: Screenshot of [wordwall.com](http://wordwall.com); jumbled words incl. solution

**Task:**

Individually create a *video diary*. Over three days you daily report about one event and how you felt about it (e.g. Today I went ice-skating in Zürich Heuried with my best friend. I felt excited because ...).

**Consider the following criteria:**

**a) Content**

- ✓ Over three days do a recording describing one event and how you felt during that moment.
- ✓ Describe the event: what, when, where and who?
- ✓ Describe your feelings: How did I feel? Why did I feel that way?
- ✓ Use your personal mindmap as a help (feelings: words/expressions).
- ✓ Video length: daily recording of 1-2 minutes

**b) Your video is...**

- ✓ clear
- ✓ appealing

Watch the following ['video diary'](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HetcF77vaEw) example as a help:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HetcF77vaEw>

Fig. 6. Task and example of video diary created with the app Clips

*Use-related practice* such as writing stories or information gap activities plays a vital role in the process of vocabulary learning. There is a great variety of digital possibilities (e.g., creating movies, writing stories, voice messages) that can be used for practicing vocabulary in contexts with a particular focus on productive skills. For individual language support, a personalized vocabulary mind map can be used.

The following example shows what this can look like:

*More used-related practice can be supported by Sway, book creator, stop motion studio, vocaroo, minibooks.ch, iMovie, padlet etc.*

## Conclusion

Digitally-oriented learning aids are inspiring, ubiquitous, easy to use, and linguistically valuable. Learners have more possibilities than ever to become exposed to and work with vocabulary whilst being engrossed in a book. This kind of reading allows for individualized learning processes in which words are assimilated interactively and used productively in pragmatically-oriented settings. Thus, recourse to word translations becomes obsolete. For teachers, such approaches of vocabulary learning pose new challenges as well, precisely because learning becomes individualized and highly personal based upon learners' linguistic skills, aptitude, motivation, and language level. Assessing newly acquired vocabulary requires other testing strategies with which learners generate output-oriented products - essay writing, presentations, blogs, videos, portfolios - with the inclusion of newly assimilated lexical items.

Digitally-oriented learning aids are inspiring, ubiquitous, easy to use, and linguistically valuable. Learners have more possibilities than ever to get exposed to, let alone actively grapple with new vocabulary while being engrossed in a book.

## References

- Cameron, L.** (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crossley, S., Kyle, K., & Salsbury, T.** (2016). A usage-based investigation of L2 lexical acquisition: The role of input and output. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(3), 702–715.
- Daniels, H., & Zemelman, S.** (2004). *Subjects matter: Every teacher's guide to content-area reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
- Ellis, N. C.** (2017). Cognition, corpora, and computing: Triangulating research in usage-based language learning. *Language Learning*, 67(S1), 40–65.
- Harmon, J. M., Wood, K. D., Hedrick, W. B., Vintinner, J., & Willeford, T.** (2009). Interactive word walls: More than just reading the writing on the walls. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(5), 398–408.
- Hutz, M.** (2018). Focus on Form- The Lexico-Grammar Approach. In C. Surkamp & B. Viebrock (eds.), *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (pp. 133-158). Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler.
- Kasper, G., & Wagner, J.** (2018). Epistemological reorientations and L2 interactional settings: A postscript to the special issue. *The Modern Language Journal*, 102, 82–90.
- Kim, M., Crossley, S. A., & Kyle, K.** (2018). Lexical sophistication as a multidimensional phenomenon: Relations to second language lexical proficiency, development, and writing quality. *The Modern Language Journal*, 102(1), 120–141.
- Nation, I. S. P.** (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Webb, S., & Nation, P.** (2017). *How vocabulary is learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.