

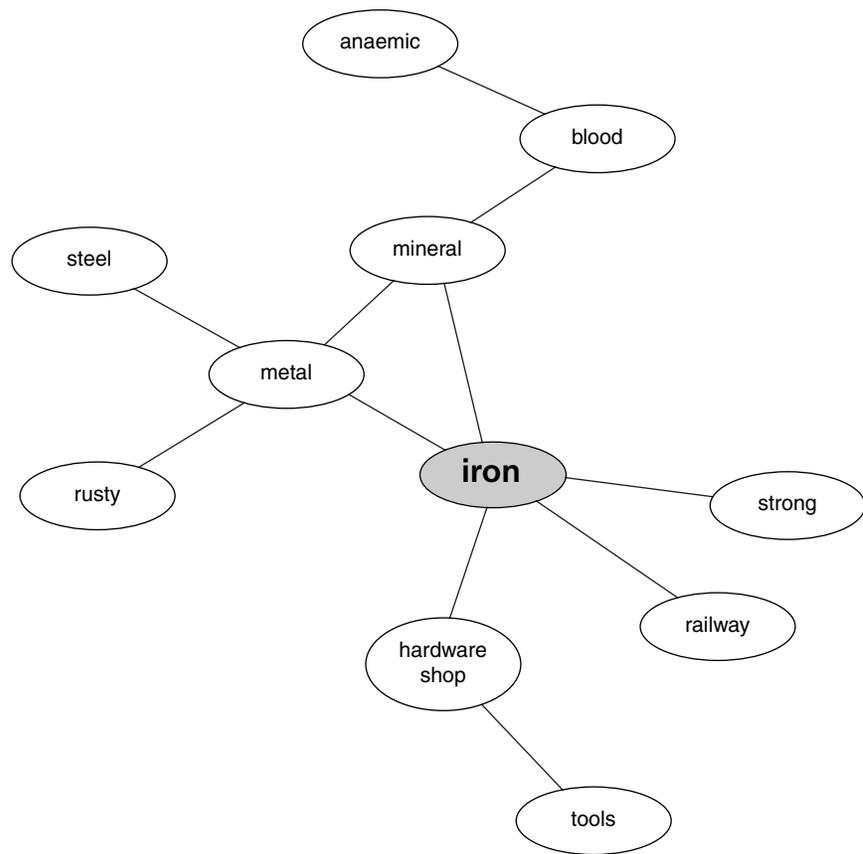
- it challenges better learners who might otherwise ‘turn off’
- it acts as a way of checking the learners’ developing understanding
- in the case of form-first presentations it encourages learners to use contextual clues

If overused, however, many of the advantages of elicitation may be lost. First of all, only the better learners may be involved in the process, while the others remain passive bystanders. The use of names (or **nominating**) when eliciting is one way round this: *What’s a waterfall? Etsuko? or Sylvia, how do you say ‘kolega’ in English?*

Prolonged elicitation sequences can end up being very frustrating for learners if they simply don’t know the answers the teacher is seeking – a cross between a quiz show and a police interrogation. Finally, if all or most of the teacher’s questions are elicitation questions, the quality of teacher–student talk can become compromised. After all, in the outside world, we seldom spend a lot of conversational time asking questions for which we already know the answer (like *What’s a waterfall?*) There are times when learners need exposure to ‘real’ questions, such as *What’s the biggest waterfall you’ve ever seen?*

This suggests that another important way of involving learners is to have them **personalise** the new words. Personalisation is simply the process of using the new word in a context that is real for the learner personally. The point was made, in Chapter 2 (page 30), that ‘memory of new words can be reinforced if they are used to express personally relevant meanings’. There are many ways of doing this. Here are some ideas:

-  Ask learners to write a true sentence using the new word, preferably applying it to themselves or someone they know – more easily done with words like *frightened* and *embarrassed* than perhaps words like *waterfall*. To help, provide a sentence frame, such as *The last time I felt frightened was when ...* Or *The biggest waterfall I have ever seen ...*
-  Learners write questions for other learners, incorporating the new word. For example: *What makes you embarrassed/frightened?* They exchange questions, write the answers, and then report to the rest of the class.
-  Ask learners to make an **association network** centred on the new word. That is, they connect the word to other words that they associate with it, however far-fetched, drawing a diagram in the manner of the example opposite. They then compare their networks with those of other students, asking about, and explaining, the associations. Here, for example, is the association network produced by one student for the word *iron*:



 If teaching a lexical set such as food items, or forms of transport, or jobs, or kinds of film, ask the learners to rank the items in order of personal preference – from most preferred to least preferred. For example, *drama, thriller, musical, western, costume drama, horror movie* ... Then, in pairs, they compare and explain their rankings.

Finally, an alternative to teacher presentation – and one that maximally involves learners – is **peer teaching**, i.e. learners teaching each other vocabulary. One way of doing this is through an **information gap** activity. This is an activity in which information is distributed between students in pairs or small groups. In order to complete a task, students must exchange information in order to ‘fill the information gap’. If the information also includes words whose meaning is known only to individual members of the group, the information exchange will require members to teach each other those words.

A lexical approach

A lexical approach to language teaching foregrounds vocabulary learning, both in the form of individual, high frequency words, and in the form of word combinations (or **chunks**). The impetus for a lexical approach to language teaching derives from the following principles:

- a syllabus should be organised around meanings
- the most frequent words encode the most frequent meanings and
- words typically co-occur with other words
- these co-occurrences (or chunks) are an aid to fluency

A syllabus organised around meanings rather than forms (such as grammar structures) is called a **semantic syllabus**. A number of theorists have suggested that a syllabus of meanings – especially those meanings that learners are likely to need to express – would be more useful than a syllabus of structures. For example, most learners will at some time need to express such categories of meaning (or **notions**) as *possession* or *frequency* or *regret* or *manner*. Simply teaching learners a variety of structures, such as the *present simple* or the *second conditional*, is no guarantee that their communicative needs will be met. The present simple, for example, supports a wide range of meanings (*present habit, future itinerary, past narrative*, etc), some of which may be less useful than others. Wouldn't it be better to start with the more useful meanings themselves, rather than the structure?

A semantic syllabus – i.e. one based around meanings – is likely to have a strong lexical focus. The following sentences, for example, all involve the present simple, but they express different notions. These notional meanings are signalled by certain key words (underlined):

Does this towel belong to you? (possession)

How often do you go to London? (frequency)

I wish I'd done French. (regret)

Exercise is the best way of losing weight. (manner)

Words like *belong*, *often*, *wish* and *way* carry the lion's share of the meaning in these sentences: the grammar is largely padding. A lexical approach argues that meaning is encoded primarily in words. This view motivated two coursebook writers, Dave and Jane Willis, to propose that a **lexical syllabus** might be the best way of organising a course. The Willises believed that a syllabus based around the most frequent words in the language would cover the most frequent meanings in the language. Accordingly, they based their beginners' course around the 700 most frequent words in English. They used **corpus** data (i.e. computer banks of naturally occurring text – see page 68) to find out how these words 'behaved' – that is, the kinds of words and structures that were associated with these high frequency words.

For example, an extremely common word in English is *way*. According to COBUILD corpus data, it is in fact the third most common noun in English (after *time* and *people*). An analysis of corpus data shows that *way* is used to express a variety of meanings: